

interzone

FEBRUARY 2003

NUMBER 186

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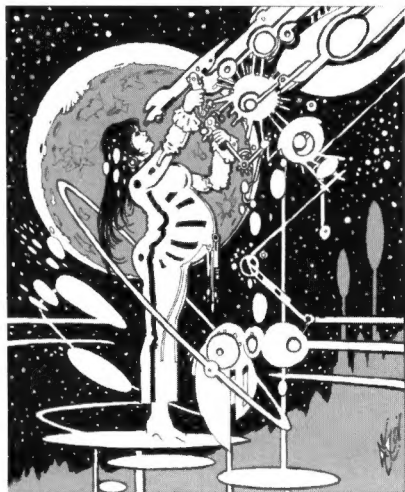
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COMING NEXT MONTH

A lively new story by Dominic Green, and a range of inventive tales by other writers, old and new – plus our usual spread of non-fiction features and reviews. So watch out for *Interzone's* March issue.



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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

FEBRUARY 2003

Number 186

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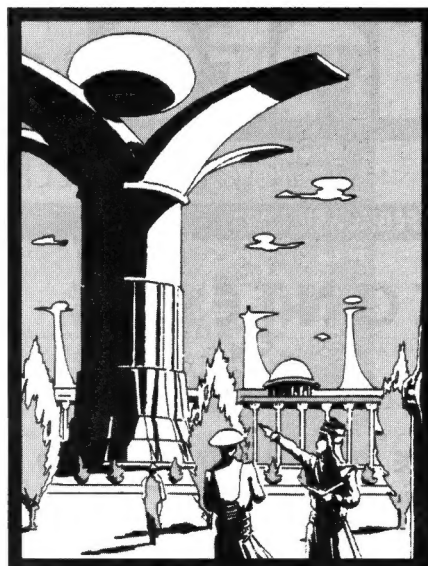
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Apologies for our lateness in reporting on this, but last year we asked *Interzone* readers to vote on their favourite (and least favourite) stories published in the magazine during the year 2001 – that is, in issue numbers 163 to 174 inclusive. Forty-four ballots were received by the deadline. Thanks very much to everyone who participated (and some of you did so in generous and interesting detail). As usual, we have subtracted all negative votes from positive ones to arrive at the following scores. The total number of stories published in 2001 was 65 – but in order to save space, and to avoid embarrassment for those authors who came towards the bottom of the heap, we list here only the top 48 out of the 65 stories.

Story Poll Results, 2001

1)	Chris Beckett: Marcher	19
2)	James Lovegrove: Junk Male	18
2=)	Ian Watson: Hijack Holiday	18
4)	Chris Beckett: Watching the Sea	17
5)	Tony Ballantyne: Indecisive Weapons	16
6)	Eric Brown: The Children of Winter	15
7)	Ian R. MacLeod: Isabel of the Fall	14
8)	Ashok Banker: In the Shadow of Her Wings	13
8=)	Eric Brown: The Frankenberg Process	13
8=)	James Lovegrove: Speedstream	13
11=)	Ayerdhal: Flickering	12
11=)	Christopher Evans: Da Capo	12
11=)	David D. Levine: Nucleon	12
14=)	Neal Asher: The Sea of Death	11
14=)	Stephen Dedman: Ptaargiu	11
14=)	Ruaridh Pringle: Meeting the Relatives	11
14=)	Lisa Tuttle: A Cold Dish	11
18=)	Paul Di Filippo: Babylon Sisters	10
18=)	Leigh Kennedy: Wind Angels	10
20=)	Gregory Benford: Ménage à Trois	9
20=)	Carolyn Ives Gilman: The Invisible Hand...	9
22=)	Tony Ballantyne: A New Beginning	8
22=)	Tony Ballantyne: Restoring the Balance 2	8



INTERFACE

22=)	Ashok Banker: www.cyber-whore.com	8
22=)	John Christopher: Rendezvous	8
22=)	Mat Coward: The Second Question	8
22=)	Stephen Dedman: Ravens	8
22=)	Graham Joyce: Partial Eclipse	8
22=)	Zoran Zivkovic: The Waiting Room	8
30=)	Tony Ballantyne: Real Man	7
30=)	Tony Ballantyne: Restoring the Balance	7
30=)	Nigel Brown: Rare as a Rocket	7
30=)	Paul Park: Self-Portrait, with Melanoma...	7
30=)	Zoran Zivkovic: The Puzzle	7
35=)	Stephen Baxter: Lost Continent	6
35=)	Jean-Claude Dunyach: Watch Me When I Sleep	6
35=)	Alexander Glass: The Eaters	6
35=)	Zoran Zivkovic: The Cat	6
39=)	Stephen Baxter: Tracks	5
39=)	Eric Brown: Ascent of Man	5
39=)	Dominic Green: Grass	5
39=)	Zoran Zivkovic: The Whisper	5
43=)	Barrington J. Bayley: Domie	4
43=)	Dominic Green: Queen of Hearts	4
43=)	Ruaridh Pringle: Surfers	4
43=)	Zoran Zivkovic: The Fire	4
47=)	Matt Colborn: The City in the Dusk	3
47=)	Liz Williams: Mr Animation...	3

Unfortunately, the remaining 17 stories – after subtracting the negative votes from the positive. Of course, some of those stories gained considerably more than three votes, but near-equal negative votes dragged them down: this was particularly the case with Richard Calder's series of stories, "The Nephilim," "Roach Motel" and "Espiritu Santo," which divided readers more than any others.

Congratulations to **Chris Beckett** on winning this year's poll. It's the first time he has done so, although he has been a long-time contributor to *Interzone*, and has developed into one of our most popular and dependable writers. (Look out for his debut novel, *The Holy Machine*, available shortly from Big Engine.) Close behind him, in equal second place, were **James Lovegrove** and **Ian Watson**, both of whose stories were sharply relevant, and in Watson's case even prophetic, satires.

Tony Ballantyne, Eric Brown, Ian R. MacLeod and new Indian writer Ashok Banker all did particularly well by coming in the top ten. Our congratulations to these writers, and indeed to all the others who reached the top few dozen. (And commiserations to those who did not: some of the "losers" deserved much better scores, in our opinion.)

David Pringle

Interzone 2002 Popularity Poll

If you can cast your mind back over last year's issues, those that carried a 2002 cover date, we'd appreciate it if you could judge the year's stories. Let us know your thoughts on the contents of *Interzone* issues 175 to 184 inclusive. (The contents of the most recent issue, number 185, and the current issue, number 186, will count towards *next* year's poll.)

There's no obligation, but we'd appreciate it if readers (especially, perhaps, those who are writing to renew their subscriptions) could send us answers to the following questions. Just e-mail your replies (interzone@cix.co.uk), or write or type them on any piece of paper, and send them to us before the deadline of **31st May 2003**. We'll report the results later in the year.

1) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 175-184 inclusive (i.e. those with a 2002 cover date) did you particularly like?

2) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 175-184 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?

Any further comments about the magazine, including its non-fiction and artwork, are also welcome.

David Pringle, Editor

Detailed Response from a Dutch Reader

Dear Editors:

Liked very much...

Asher, Neal – “The Sea of Death” (#169). Mystery and sense of wonder: almost “classic” sf reminiscent of James Blish’s “Surface Tension,” albeit in a slanted way. Very good.

Banker, Ashok – “In the Shadow of Her Wings” (#166).

Banker, Ashok – “www.cyber-whore.com” (#170). Superb.

Baxter, Stephen – “Lost Continent” (#164). Although he gave hints throughout the story I didn’t see the clue until the end. Stephen Baxter remains versatile and prolific, not the easiest thing to do, to say the least.

Benford, Gregory – “Ménage à Trois” (#173). Good to see him back in short-story form. Only other place this year I’ve seen him with a short story is in *Redshift* (quite a decent anthology, just don’t read the introduction: inflated self-hype) and here he is in *Interzone* with two. While I thought “Three Gods” (#171) was a bit bland, this one was spot on, one of my favourites of the year.

Calder, Richard – “Roach Motel” (#166). The “Lord Soho” series didn’t captivate me, but neither do I hate them as some others seem to do. However, this one was top-notch; it easily held me captured to the end.

Dedman, Stephen – “Ravens” (#164). With Dedman it’s a kind of hit-and-miss thing. Some stories fail to make the slightest impression and some I like very much with almost nothing in between. This one worked very well for me.

Di Filippo, Paul – “Babylon Sisters” (#168). As bad as his “Return to Cockaigne” was, so is this one good. You see stories of him everywhere, in a lot of magazines and anthologies, and I can’t help but wonder that quality is suffering a little bit with quantity here. For example, his “Weeping Walls” in *Redshift* was quite good, while “Doing the Unstuck” in *F&SF* didn’t quite stick with me. Peaks and troughs, but if he’s good he’s very good indeed.

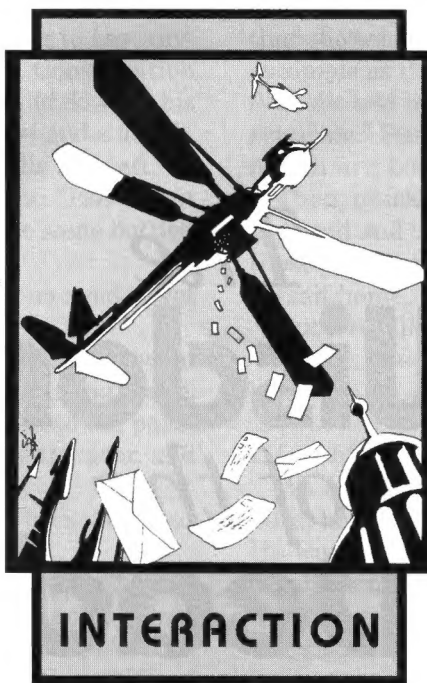
Glass, Alexander – “The Eaters” (#164). Weird and wonderful, this one.

Gray, Roy – “Wormholes” (#166).

Short, sharp and funny.

Green, Dominic – “Grass” (#168). Although the speculation is somewhat far-fetched (in my humble opinion) he carries it off with verve: I suspended my disbelief throughout. Only good storytellers can do that.

Lovegrove, James – “Junk Male” (#171). Wry and witty. While “Speedstream” was good this was better.



MacLeod, Ian R. – “Isabel of the Fall” (#169). A story in a Gene Wolfean vein: sf disguised as fantasy. I had to reread this one a few times. Disliked it at first but as meaning dawned on me I now am quite fond of it. And it’s always good to see Ian MacLeod again.

Pringle, Ruairidh – “Meeting the Relatives” (#171). More focused and less self-indulgent than “Surfers” and therefore better. “Surfers” did not make my final cut because I found it impossible to suspend my disbelief in the crazy conjecture and the self-indulgence: the protagonist (read: author) in a wish-fulfilment scheme playing with his favourite musicians. The same kind of overindulgence in late-20th century pop culture spoiled – to some degree – Chris Evans’s “Da Capo” and – completely – Gwyneth Jones’s “The Salt Box” for me. Anyway, “Meeting the Relatives” may be slightly less quirky than “Surfers” but because it was not so over-the-top it worked just that bit better. For others it may well have been the other way around.

Watson, Ian – “Hijack Holiday” (#166). Any comment on this prescient piece seems superfluous.

Disliked...

Di Filippo, Paul – “Return to Cockaigne” (#163). Boring, very boring indeed.

Garratt, Peter T. – “A Connecticut Welshman at Artognov’s Court”

Letters for publication should be e-mailed to interzone@cix.co.uk – or sent by conventional post to our editorial address (shown on the contents page). Please note that we reserve the right to shorten letters.

(#167). A rehash of a rehash of an original: story-cloning at its most perverse.

Jones, Gwyneth – “The Salt Box” (#169). Way too much Twen-Cen pop-culture self-indulgence, not satirized as in Christopher Evans’s “Da Capo” (#174). Also: no novel excerpts, please.

Mixed feelings...

Evans, Christopher – “Da Capo” (#174). Good story, ending did take me somewhat by surprise – I expected something different. Still, this overindulgence of second half of 20th-century pop culture begins to get out of hand: see Gwyneth Jones’s “The Salt Box” (#169).

Zivkovic, Zoran – “The Waiting Room” (#173). The surprise, the freshness, the novelty begins to wear off from Zoran’s stories. Solid writing, literary sf/fantasy, good metaphors. But still... However: the last two in the series – “The Violinist” and “The Violin-Maker” – are up to par again.

Best issue: April 2001 (#166). not only chock-full with fine fiction but with a cover to boot. Followed close by February (#164). Dominic Harman’s covers stand out from the rest, with the “Roach Motel” one as my clear favourite.

Non-fiction: I did not follow all the hubbub over Evelyn Lewes’s reviews simply because I do not watch TV (rather read a good book). My advice is: kick the TV out, gives you a lot of extra time to catch up on your reading. The *Interaction* this year was quite lively on other fronts, too.

Langford’s “Ansible Link” and Lowe’s “Mutant Popcorn” remain top-notch, the book reviews remains indispensable as well. Do keep up the good work, if possible for another 20 years!

Jetse de Vries

Den Bosch, Netherlands

JetsedV@cs.com

Family Bliss

Dear Editors:

I’ve given your magazine a thorough road test, and after ten years of nearly missing an issue at each renewal time, pink reminder forms received, etc., the time has come for a full commitment. My family all read “our” issue and have fun discussing good and bad stories and disagreeing about whether the fiction or non-fiction is better. (Me – fiction, him – non-fiction. I this a usual male-female split?) So we’re taking up your (still amazingly cheap) lifetime subscription rate, and enclose a cheque for £340. Hooray for you, and thanks again.

Sarah Dodgson
London

The Wisdom of the Dead

Eric Brown

I was there at the beginning, and I was there at the very end.

I was in the snug of the Fleece when Khalid announced that his wife was leaving him, and I was in the lounge of his converted coach-house a year later when he explained to me the circumstances of his death.

That night I finished a long shift making deliveries to the Onward Station high on the moors, and I was in need of a pint or two in the company of the usual Tuesday night crowd.

It was a balmy summer's evening, and the clientele of the Fleece were making the most of the weather and drinking in the lane. The snug was almost empty, but for the regulars: Ben and Elisabeth, Jeff Morrow, Dan Chester my Ferryman colleague, and Khalid Azzam.

I carried my pint over to their table, sat down and stared around at my friends. They were quiet. "You look as though you've just got back from a funeral," I said.

They said nothing, and I thought for a second that I'd committed terrible social gaff, and they *had* been to a funeral.

Jeff just shrugged, uneasy. Ben and Elisabeth looked away. I smiled. "What's wrong?"

Khalid said, "I think it's my fault, Richard," and fell silent.

Jeff said, to Khalid, "You can tell us, Khal. We're friends, you know?"

Elisabeth caught my gaze and pulled a worried face, looking at Khalid.

He was sitting at the end of the table, his pint untouched before him. He was a doctor at Bradley General, head of the Implant ward, usually immaculately turned out, clean shaven and dapper. Tonight he was unshaven, his hair dishevelled. His gaze was remote.

From time to time he fingered the implant at his temple, absently.

He looked up, at each of us in turn.

Only then did I wonder where Zara was, and I recall thinking to myself: *I'm not going to like this one bit...*

He cleared his throat and said, "Zara is leaving me." He looked at his watch. "In fact, she's probably left already."

Dan Chester said, "My god."

Elisabeth took Khalid's hand.

I murmured something along the lines that I was sorry. More than that, I was shocked. I liked Zara. She taught English at Jeff's school in Bradley, an attractive, highly intelligent woman in her early 30s. She and Khalid had always struck me as a loving and devoted couple.

Khalid stared at his pint. "Things haven't been going well for six months or so. She was... cold, remote. I thought it was..." He shrugged and looked helpless. "I don't know what I thought. Then last week she told me she'd met someone else and was moving out."

We sympathized, with all the useless old platitudes

that come to play in these situations.

Khalid fell silent, obviously not wanting to say anything more, and we changed the subject. Conversation was forced for the rest of the evening. Khalid downed his pint, and I bought him another, then a third and a fourth.

At 11.30 the others made their farewells and left.

Khalid finished his pint and looked at me. "How about a drink back at my place, Richard? I have some bottled Landlord."

I had a couple of days off, so there was no need to get up early tomorrow.

Khalid lives next door to me, in the converted coach-house a few doors down from the Fleece. It's a big house, with a front door that opens immediately onto the pavement. Khalid, key in hand, paused before the door, and took a deep breath.

This would be the first time he came home without Zara being there to greet him.

I settled myself in a sofa in the lounge while Khalid fetched the beer. It was a large, comfortable room, white walls and ancient black beams, and a big brass-cowled fireplace which belted out welcome heat in the middle of winter.

Then I noticed the sculpture.

Khalid entered the room, and stopped. He stared at the sculpture, his expression folding. I thought he was about to weep.

The carving, in dark, polished wood, showed two figures, a man and a woman, entwined in an intimate embrace.

A Post-It note was affixed to the woman's out-thrust buttock. Before Khalid snatched it up, I read: *Khal, I couldn't fit this in the car. I'll be back for it later. Zara.*

He looked at me. "We think we know people, don't we?"

I smiled, sympathetically, and took a long swallow of ale.

Khalid slumped onto the sofa. "I was happy with Zara. She was perfect. We fitted. I thought, I want to spend the rest of my life with this woman." He shrugged, regarding the bottle in his hand. "I assumed she thought the same. She told me she did. Then... as I said, about six months ago. I sensed a shift in things, how we related. She was keeping something back. I thought it was a phase."

I shook my head. His words released unpleasant memories. Ten years ago my wife, Barbara, had left me in acrimonious circumstances. Even though our relationship hadn't been working for years, and the split was inevitable, it was still painful. I could imagine the anguish Khalid was suffering.

He looked up. "Last week she told me she'd met someone and intended to live with him. An artist who comes into her school once a week. A sculptor."

I glanced at the entwined figures without making it obvious: of course, now that I looked closely, the naked female figure in the arms of the male was Zara...

Khalid saw my gaze and laughed. "She bought this about three months ago. She put it in the bedroom. I mean, Richard, how bloody cruel can you get?"

The silence stretched. I wanted to say something, but nothing seemed appropriate.

He went on, "I tried asking, again and again, what I'd done wrong. What was wrong with our relationship. The

frustrating thing was, she refused to talk. She simply said that she was sorry, that she'd fallen out of love with me, as simple as that. And then she met... Simon, he's called. And she told me she knew she'd made a mistake in marrying me." He wept, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth in a bid to stem the sobs.

Then, quickly, he apologized, and I smiled and shook my head and told him how it had been with Barbara, all those years ago. It was the early hours before I dragged myself home.

But I recall the last thing he said to me before I left: "Richard, I never realized that love could turn to so much hatred."

Life continued.

We met in the Fleece every Tuesday, but we missed Zara, her lively wit and humour. We missed Khalid, too. He was there in body, but not in spirit. He seemed to inhabit some far-off realm. Usually eager to take part in any discussion, these days he was silent, unwilling to be drawn on any topic. He would nurse his pint and stare into space, emanating an almost palpable air of misery.

I called around one day to find him slumped in an armchair, staring into the empty hearth.

"It's only me," I called from the hall on finding the front door open. "I've brought this back." I indicated the hammer I'd borrowed weeks earlier.

"I won't stay," I went on, seeing him in the chair. But he protested.

"No, stay a while. Coffee?" He seemed eager for company.

"The hell of it is," he said a little later, "that everything reminds me of Zara. This house, the village."

"Have you thought of moving? Selling this place, I mean?"

He shook his head. "To be honest I've been so low that I can't shift myself to do anything. I've thought about selling up, but that'd be as good as admitting defeat. I keep thinking that the pain will stop, in time. But if anything it only gets worse."

I indicated the place beside the hearth where the sculpture had stood. "I see she's taken it away?"

"She hasn't been back here," he said, bitter. "I had to take it round to Simon's place. I never really realized how easy it would be to murder someone, and think nothing of it." He looked up at me. "You're shocked, I can see. I went round to his studio and told him I wouldn't be needing the sculpture, thanks. He was so damned reasonable about things that I wanted to hit him over the head with it. The terrible thing is, Richard, that I feel I could be violent towards Zara, too."

I nodded. "Have you seen her since...?"

"Once, by accident."

"Don't you think it'd make things easier if you could still be friends?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think that, and at others I think I never want to see her again."

A few weeks later I was in the supermarket in Bradley when I heard a familiar voice behind me.

"Richard?" Her tone was diffident, unsure.

I turned. "Zara. Nice to see you."

She looked radiant. She had that demure, elegant poise possessed by some Anglo-Pakistani women in their 30s; she was tall, slim, raven-haired, and wore subtle purple eye-shadow that complimented her mocha skin.

"Richard..." She waited until an old lady was out of earshot, then went on in a low voice, "I hope you don't hate me for what happened between me and..."

I blustered. "These things happen."

She laid a hand on my arm. "I just had to get out, Richard. The relationship was just too oppressive."

I nodded, at a loss to know how to respond.

"Khal comes from a very traditional Bradford family," she went on. "He was domineering. Do you know, he didn't really like my teaching?"

I made some murmured comment along the lines that I never realized...

"Life was getting oppressive. Towards the end I really hated him. And then I met Simon, and I knew that I'd made a big mistake in marrying Khal."

I nodded again, and said, "Sometimes these realizations hit you, Zara. And you're happy now?"

She hesitated. "Simon and I want to get married, but Khal -"

"He won't grant a divorce?" I didn't know whether to be disappointed at Khalid's pettiness, or amazed at Zara's bourgeois desire to marry. Once bitten, I wanted to tell her...

"How cruel can you get, Richard? I spoke to him on the phone the other day, and the hatred..."

"Have you talked with him about why you left? Have you tried telling your side of the story?"

She almost laughed at that. "You don't know him!" she said. "He wouldn't listen to a word I said. He's in the right, always. Richard, as far as he's concerned, I'm just a woman."

I said goodbye a little later, saying that we must keep in touch.

I recall driving home through the autumn twilight and wondering who was right, who wrong, and if objective truth was a valid concept.

August arrived, and with it the return from the stars of Dan Chester's six year-old daughter, Lucy. She'd died of leukaemia six months before, and had been taken away on a Kéthani starship for the process of her resurrection on the aliens' home planet.

Her homecoming took place on a warm Autumn afternoon. I drove Dan up to the Onward Station, feeling something of his joy and anticipation. For the past ten years I'd collected the dead from Bradley and the immediate locality, and I suppose I'd become inured to the miracle of resurrection. Every night the dead were beamed from the Station to the orbiting Kéthani starship in great blinding bolts of energy, and these days I hardly gave the event a second glance.

But I'd never been on hand to see a returnee step into the reception area of the Station to be reunited with loved ones.

Dan had asked myself, Jeff Morrow, Ben and Elisabeth,

and Khalid and Zara to the occasion. Zara had excused herself due to work, and so freed Khalid to attend.

He turned up late. I saw him sneak guiltily into the reception lounge mere seconds before Lucy arrived. I caught sight of his bruised face, briefly, before the sliding door sighed open.

Beside me, Dan Chester stiffened, then let out a stifled sob and hurried forward.

Lucy skipped through the portal, a lively bundle in a red one piece suit, pale and slim as I remembered her, elf-like. "Daddy!" she cried, and leapt into his arms.

My throat was sore with the effort of not weeping.

"The aliens machines made me all better, daddy! I met lots and lots of nice people. We were in a big glass dome, and I could look out over lots of grass. The instructors said that I could go back into space when I'm grown up!"

We'd booked a room at the Fleece for the welcome-home party. I drove Dan and Lucy back to the village, and Dan gave a short speech and proposed a toast to his daughter. Lucy had always been a favourite among the locals, and now she was in demand to tell her story. She ran from group to group, chattering away.

It was a while before I cornered Khalid and indicated his black eye. "Argument with the door?" I asked.

He sipped his bitter. "With Simon Carter. Zara was on the phone the other night, telling me that Simon wanted to marry her. She wants a divorce."

I almost said that he'd gain nothing from refusing Zara's request. They would marry eventually, whether he wanted it or not.

"I snapped. I went round to his studio earlier and did what I should have done months ago."

I winced. "That wouldn't endear Zara to you -"

"You don't think I give a fuck about what she thinks any more, do you?" he said. He looked at his knuckles; they were bruised and bloodied, and I felt a quick stab of sympathy for the victim of his anger.

Over the course of the next few months, Khalid rarely showed up at the Fleece for our Tuesday night sessions. I called round a few times, but he was sullen and uncommunicative.

At one point he seemed so low that I said, "Khal, look... Don't do anything stupid, okay?"

He stared at me, then laughed. "What, like kill myself? The Kéthani have taken away that option, haven't they?" He tapped his implant. "Though I could always have this taken out, I suppose." Something in his bitter tone, his intense stare as I left him, alarmed me.

Winter arrived. Snow fell with a vengeance. The village was cut off for two days, lending a siege mentality to the place. We made the best of it and inhabited the snug of the Fleece, as you do in emergencies. Lucy and the other kids made snowmen and sledged until frost-bite threatened.

A week before Christmas, with snow still falling and more on the way, Khalid called around. It was a fortnight since I'd last seen him, and I took his visit as a hopeful sign. He seemed a little brighter.

He was going away for the holiday period, visiting student friends in Norfolk, and wanted to borrow the elas-

ticated rope I used to secure luggage on my roof-rack.

We chatted desultorily over coffee; not once did he mention Zara, which I took as another good sign.

Christmas Eve came around yet again, and I was due to meet everyone at the Fleece for our traditional festive get-together. This year Ben and Elisabeth had invited Jeff and myself – lone sheep at this time of the year – along with Dan Chester and Lucy, round to their place for Christmas day. I was looking forward to the occasion. I usually make lame excuses and stay at home, or put my name down on the work roster, but for some unaccountable reason this time I'd succumbed to pressure and agreed to forgo my usual seasonal humbug. Perhaps the thought of watching Lucy, opening her presents, stirred memories of my own daughter doing the same, many years ago.

She was in Canada now, married with a child. I kept meaning to visit, but apathy always won out. I've noticed that with the advance of the years we find our safe routines, and resist all opportunities to deviate.

I heard the sound around eight. I had never before heard a gunshot, and I had no idea, then, that it was such. It sounded too dull and muffled – reminiscent of the bangers we let off in the confined space of the gent's loo when we were kids.

I thought nothing more of it, until five minutes later when I heard a hammering on the front door.

It sounded frantic.

I hurried into the hall and pulled open the door.

"Zara," I began.

She clutched my arm. "Richard, you've got to come! It's Khal..."

She was shaking, and looked shocked: that vacant, dead expression the face assumes when the brain cannot assimilate the fact of tragedy.

I found my shoes, dragged on a coat, and followed her along the snow-covered pavement.

Khal's front door was open. Zara was explaining, "He asked me to come round. He said he had a present. I said I could only stay for a few minutes..." She broke down.

I hurried into the house.

The lounge was in disarray. An armchair had been over-turned, a lamp-stand knocked over. A magazine rack had toppled, sending its glossy contents avalanching across the carpet.

I did not immediately see Khalid – perhaps my eyes saw him, but my brain refused to accept the image.

Only when I had taken in the state of the room did I notice the body.

He was lying before the hearth, on his back. In the centre of his chest, gaudy crimson on his white shirt, was a bloodstain. His eyes were open, staring glassily at the ceiling.

I was overcome with a fleeting dizziness. In my line of work I deal with bodies everyday, but I had never before witnessed a victim of violence.

I gathered myself, knelt and reached out and touched his implant. It vibrated quickly beneath my fingertips.

I looked up. Zara was standing by the door, fingers to her lips, sobbing.

I moved to her and took her in my arms. "It's okay," I soothed. "The implant's working. The team at the Onward Station will know of his death. They'll send out a Ferryman and notify the police."

The room was cold. There was no fire lit in the hearth, and the door was still open. I closed it.

"When did you get here?" I asked.

"Just minutes ago. I came straight in, and when I saw... I came straight to you."

I recalled hearing the detonation, perhaps ten minutes ago. I opened the door and looked out, but the snow on the pavement was a churned and slushy mess, bearing no obliging record of the killer's footprints.

I returned to Zara. She stared at me. "Who'd do such a thing?" she asked. "It doesn't make sense."

It didn't make any sense at all. It was hard to think who might have hated Khalid enough to kill him – but in this day and age it was almost impossible to work out why anyone might be drawn to homicide, other than in the heat of the moment.

Since the coming of the Kéthani, the incidence of murder world-wide had fallen dramatically. Why kill someone when they would be brought back to life to incriminate their killer? Of course, murder was still committed – crimes of passion, incidents of hatred when the killer was barely conscious of the act...

There was a knock at the door. I opened it, expecting a Ferryman or the police, or both. Instead, a tall, balding stranger stood on the front step, stamping his feet in the cold.

Zara hurried over to him. "Simon," she said.

I looked mystified. Zara explained, "Simon dropped me off and went to park at the Fleece."

Simon nodded to me and stepped inside. "What's the delay – ?" he began, and then saw the body. He went white, then slid down the wall and slumped into a sitting position.

Zara sat next to him, quietly crying on his shoulder.

Five minutes later Dan Chester arrived, accompanied by the local constable. While the policeman called in his superiors over at Bradley, I took Dan to one side and explained the situation.

He stared down at the body. "Christ, who'd do such a thing..." He glanced across at Zara.

"No way!" I hissed. "She came straight round to my place when she found him. She was distraught. And anyway, *why* would she do something so stupid when Khalid would incriminate her when he returned?"

He shrugged. "Okay, but what if she came here without intending to kill him? They argued, struggled. The place is a mess. What if Khal threatened her –"

"And she just happened to be carrying a gun? Highly bloody unlikely!"

"What about her new bloke? What if they argued?"

I recalled what Khalid had told me a while back, about the bust-up he'd had with Simon. Had Simon harboured a resentment?

"Okay," I said, "but the same question applies. Why kill when you'll be found out in six months? You just wouldn't do it – not even in the heat of the moment."

Minutes later the CID from Bradley arrived, along with a forensic team and a scene-of-crime squad.

While the forensic scientists photographed the body, a detective inspector took preliminary statements from Zara, myself and Simon.

Later we were driven in separate cars to Bradley police station and questioned there at length.

It was almost ten by the time I returned home, changed and made my way to the Fleece.

Ben and Elisabeth were in the snug, with Jeff Morrow. They looked concerned when they saw me.

"Richard," Jeff said, "what's happening? We saw the police cars outside Khal's. Where's Khal and Dan?"

Before saying anything, I bought myself a drink – a double whisky – and suggested we occupy a table beside the fire.

"What?" Elisabeth asked.

I told them what had happened that evening, from my hearing the gunshot, and Zara's arrival, to finding Khal's body.

"But who the hell would have killed Khal?" Ben asked, a question that I'd heard enough already, and was to hear countless times again over the course of the next few weeks.

I told them about Dan's errant speculation that Zara or Simon had pulled the trigger. "But it just doesn't make sense," I said, and outlined my objections again.

"You said that Khal beat up this Simon character a bit back?" Ben asked.

I nodded. "But I hardly think that a motive enough to kill someone!"

"You don't know what this Simon's like –"

"But, again, why would he kill Khal when, in six months Khal will return to point the finger? It's absurd."

Jeff said, "Perhaps Simon didn't pull the trigger as it were. He hired a hit-man to do it, someone Khal wouldn't know from Adam."

"But why would he do that? Why kill someone when they'd be brought back to life in six months?"

Jeff shrugged. "Maybe he just wanted Khalid out of the way."

I almost laughed at that. "This is sounding more like a detective mystery by the second. Look, the explanation will be very simple. Khal disturbed someone burgling the house. He picked up a poker to fight off the intruder. Intruder pulls a gun and without considering the consequences – in self-defence, he might claim – fires. End of story."

Or so I wanted to think. But my friends' suspicions had sown seeds of doubt in my mind.

It was a sombre Christmas. Okay, so thanks to the Kéthani Khalid would be resurrected by summer, but that didn't remove the fact that a nasty crime had been committed on our doorstep, and that the killer was still at large.

In the slow, dead period immediately after Christmas, Khalid's murder made the national news. Reporters – the scum of the Earth, in my opinion – doorstepped Khalid's every acquaintance in the village. They wrote lurid sto-

ries of his break-up with Zara, and his affair – wholly apocryphal – with a young nurse at his hospital. I ignored every one of the skulking bastards, but did come close to punching a particularly obnoxious journalist who offered me 25,000 Euros for my exclusive story.

I was called into Bradley police station again to give another account of my actions on the night of the murder, and from local gossip learned that Zara and Simon had made frequent visits to the station, accompanied by officers. The case was put on hold until the time of Khalid's return in June, and gradually media interest faded away.

Life returned to normal. After the Christmas break I resumed my four day on, three day off stint delivering the dead to Onward Station. Late at night, after a long shift, I would often look up at the winter darkness and wonder where Barbara, my wife, might be among the massed stars. I thought of Khalid, too, his resurrection and eventual return to Earth for questioning about his death.

The topic of conversation every Tuesday night for a long while was of course the murder. Dan Chester heard from a police friend that Khalid had been shot at close range, no more than half a metre away, by a single bullet from 0.2 automatic, not that this information meant much to the rest of us. The police were no nearer apprehending his killer: if truth be known, they weren't even working on the case, as in all likelihood it would be solved on Khal's return.

One Tuesday in March, Jeff Morrow fuelled speculation. He joined us with his pint, took an appreciative mouthful, and said, "You recall we were kicking around the idea that Zara or Simon might have done the deed –"

"You were kicking the idea around," I reminded him.

He nodded. "Okay, so concede for a second that one of them might have pulled the trigger. In June, when Khalid returns, the game will be up. They'll be exposed."

"If," I pointed out, "they had anything to do with it."

"And if they had, do you think they'd stay around to be incriminated?"

Elisabeth said, "Obviously not, but like Richard I don't think –"

Jeff said, "Zara left school on Friday and hasn't been seen since. Simon likewise. Police called round his house on Sunday and found it empty. They've done a bunk."

I stared at him. "So they've gone away for a while, a short break. They'll be back."

Dan said, "They weren't under any kind of restraint to remain in the area, Jeff. As long as they notify the police of their whereabouts every week, as far as I understand it..."

The weeks passed. There was no sign of Zara or Simon, and local gossip was rife. Dan tried to find out from his tame police friend if indeed the couple were in contact with the authorities, but the police were playing the case close to their collective chest.

June came, and the day of Khalid's return.

I'd made the last delivery of an early shift around four o'clock that afternoon, and I hung around until five hoping to see Khalid, maybe even snatch a word or two with him. In the event he was met by two plainclothes officers who whisked him away in an unmarked police car, pre-

sumably to Bradley for questioning.

Around seven that evening I received a phone call.

"Richard?"

"Khalid! Where are you?"

"I'm at home. I was wondering, could you call round?"

"Of course. I'm on my way."

Two minutes later I stepped into the lounge where, six months earlier, I had seen Khalid sprawled dead, a bullet hole in his chest.

Now he stood in the middle of the room, as large as life. He was wearing a crisp white shirt, identical to the one I had seen saturated in blood; it seemed a life-time ago, now.

We live life with a mere abstract understanding of what the implants – the symbol of our immortality – mean to us. The concept of continued life is just too vast a notion for the puny human brain to grasp: I found it hard to believe, as I stared at him across the room, that Khalid had died and been returned.

I stepped forward and hugged him. "It's great to have you back, Khal."

He smiled, his eyes filmed with tears. "You don't know how good it is to be back."

He fixed me a coffee, and we sat before the empty hearth while I brought him up to date with what had been happening in the village in his absence.

We seemed to be playing around the edges of what we really wanted to talk about. I had the burning desire to ask him, firstly, what it had been like on the home planet of the Kéthani. Returnees rarely talk of their experiences on Kéthan, and then only in the most abstract of terms. It's as if the desire to expound on the circumstances of their resurrections had been programmed out of them by their alien benefactors. The first returnees, ten years ago, were besieged by the media with offers of riches for their stories. They all refused.

Secondly, of course, I wanted to ask him about what had happened on the evening of his death.

After a period of silence, Khalid stared into the empty fire. He played with his coffee cup. "I had a lot of time to think about life while I was up there," he said.

I nodded. "It must have been a profound experience."

"We never saw the Kéthani, you know. We were schooled by human instructors, who oddly enough seemed alien themselves. Calm, centred, all knowing."

"What was it like?"

He shook his head. "We were in vast domes, looking out over idyllic pastures." This was the stock line the returnees came out with. "I suspect the landscape wasn't what Kéthan was like at all, just some virtual scene manufactured to soothe us. I met many people. We meditated a lot, were instructed in what I can only call Kéthani-Zen." He laughed. "And me, a good ex-Muslim!"

He paused, then continued, "I looked into myself, Richard. I saw what a shallow, self-centred person I was, before. The way I treated Zara, for instance."

I looked away, embarrassed.

He went on, "It might have looked like the perfect marriage from the outside, but I wasn't the perfect husband." He smiled to himself. "In retrospect, it's little wonder she

left me for someone else."

I shifted in my seat, uncomfortable. To change the subject, I said, "The night you... you died. Zara found you and came round." I shrugged. "Everyone thought you'd interrupted an intruder. There was a scuffle..."

He stared at me, his gaze uncomfortably penetrating. "I've just told the police that I came from upstairs to find a masked man in the lounge. I picked up the first thing to hand – a poker –" he indicated the implement, standing innocently in its holder – "and went for him. The man drew a gun and fired before I could react. I told the police that I had no hope of recognizing him."

"So the killer's still out there somewhere," I said.

Khalid lifted his gaze and stared at me. "Except, Richard, that isn't what happened."

My stomach turned. I recalled meeting Zara in the supermarket, tall and elegant and quite beautiful. I wondered how she could have brought herself to kill – or cause to have killed – her husband, no matter how domineering he might have been.

Despite my objections to Dan Chester's theory in the pub all those months ago, I knew what was coming.

"You mean," I found my voice at last, "it was Zara or Simon?"

He smiled. "No," he said, "but at first that's what I'd planned."

I stared at him. "I'm sorry? You've lost me."

"I was consumed by so much rage and hatred in the months after Zara left me," he said. "I never thought I could feel such anger towards anyone. And then I had that run-in with Simon. All I wanted was revenge. Life seemed pointless. Then it came to me, how I could kill two birds with one stone, as it were."

I felt a growing emptiness inside me. "I'm not sure I follow..."

"I planned to come back and incriminate either Zara or Simon. I wasn't sure which. Maybe both of them. I'd come back and tell the police that they'd entered the house, we'd argued, then they'd pulled a gun, and bang... But I learned a lot up there, Richard. I learned that I shouldn't blame others, but look into myself and seek the causes there."

The silence stretched. "You killed yourself," I murmured at last. "But how on Earth...? I mean, they never found the gun –"

He silenced me by reaching behind a cushion on the sofa and handing me a torch. I stared at it. For a second I thought that this was the murder weapon, ingeniously disguised.

But Khalid was indicating the open hearth. "Look up the chimney, Richard. It's okay, it's clean."

I stared at him, switched on the torch, then manoeuvred myself into the roomy fireplace. Khalid had removed the grate, and I crouched and shone the torch upwards, illuminating draughty brickwork.

"I don't see anything," I said.

"Reach up, behind that projecting stone."

I did as instructed, and my hand touched something icy cold. I pulled, but was met with resistance. "It isn't coming," I said, and I knew why, then.

I pulled, and the icy object appeared around the brick-

work. It reflected the light of the torch.

The pistol was affixed to the elasticated rope I had given Khalid the week before his death.

I ducked for the hearth, pulling the pistol after me. The rope reached the limit of its elasticity, about a metre from the fireplace.

"It's okay," he said, noticing my distaste as I stared at the weapon. "It was loaded with a single bullet."

I looked at him. "You messed up the room, made it look as if there'd been a struggle. Then, when Zara was due..." I lifted the pistol to my chest. "Bang," I said, and released my grip on the weapon.

It crashed against the brass cowl and rattled up the chimney breast. "Ingenious," I said.

"It was a measure of my anger, my immaturity, my jealousy," Khalid said. "I've come to realize that now. We live and learn." He smiled. "Or rather, in my case, we die and learn."

I hesitated. "What now?" I said.

"I had to tell someone," Khalid said. "Now it's up to you. You can tell the authorities, and they'll charge me for wasting valuable police time. I'd understand -"

I stopped him. "You've come to see what a mistake you made," I said. "Nothing else matters."

He released a long, pent-up breath. "I could kill a pint, Richard."

We stepped from the house, turned and make our way

towards the Fleece. Then we stopped, and stared into the night sky.

High over the moors, arching into the darkness, was a bolt of pure white energy, the latest consignment of dead to be beamed from the Onward Station towards the waiting Kéthani starship.

I looked at Khalid. "Have you decided what you're going to do?"

"I considered going among the stars," he said, "an ambassador for the Kéthani. Maybe I'll go later, Richard. I have all the time in the universe, after all."

I smiled.

"I'll remain on Earth," Khalid said, "working at the hospital. The Implantation process is important. I feel as if I'm doing some good in the world. There are a lot of people out there who refuse the Implants. Perhaps I can tell them something of the wonder and enlightenment I experienced up there."

And as the dead illuminated us on their journey heavenwards, we made our way towards the Fleece.

Eric Brown's last stories here were "The Children of Winter" (issue 163 – winner of the British SF Association Award as best short story of 2001), "Ascent of Man" (issue 167), "The Frankenberg Process" (issue 171) and the novella "The Blue Portal" (two parts, issues 180-181). An *Interzone* discovery (class of 1987), he lives in Haworth, West Yorkshire.

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The Runners in the Maze

Darrell Schweitzer

Readers, I address you *as a dead man*, as one who died on a terrible night in October of 18__, in my twelfth year, when a shipwreck off the Cornish coast made what was to be my first, adventurous exploration of the British Isles into an unwanted change of residence, as sudden and unexpectedly permanent as the door of a tomb slamming shut.

As a dead man I write, for what I experienced thereafter, for more than eight years, can hardly be considered, by any reasonable standard, living. Yet it is my observation, *as one who has died*, that for me the event, or process, was not an end, but a beginning.

I did not *drown*, I assure you. Nothing so simple. My death, then, was less of the body than of the *soul*, yet it is more, I insist, than some mere, florid metaphor.

Of that much I am certain.

For I know when I fell into the darkness from which I have never emerged.

On that night, tempest had raged for hours, howling and thundering, heaving our ship like a toy tossed by the angry gods. My parents and I clung together in the swaying cabin and prayed to God for the merciful continuation of our lives. Then came the grinding, tearing sound that we more *felt* beneath our knees than heard with our ears. All motion of our vessel ceased, though at that instant the window in our cabin burst open and seawater sent us sprawling. We groped our way blindly into a sharply tilted corridor, struggling with other shouting passengers, waist-deep in frigid water. No one had to say what we all knew, that the ship had run aground, that

the waves would soon batter it to splinters.

Our only hope was to make it up to the deck, and, with the utmost effort, we did, my heroic father often carrying my mother and myself. For an instant there was, literally, a flash of hope, as the lightning revealed our would-be rescuers, not far distant, atop a cliff above a rocky beach.

There was no time to lose. Waves broke over the deck. I saw one screaming woman, her skirts spread out like an enormous, dark flower, washed twirling over the side and to her death. Yet now there were lanterns on the cliff, and voices shouting. Our captain shouted replies through his speaking horn.

A rescue car was deployed, a rope made fast between our mainmast and the top of the cliff, and the car, like an iron coffin, slung along this rope, whereby persons could be hauled to safety one by one.

As the only child present, I was first into the car, placed there by strong hands before I could even bid my mother farewell or exchange some piety. I glimpsed her pale, wet face, one last time. Father was beside her, clinging to her and to some rigging. Then the hatch to the car slammed shut and I was off into space, rain rattling off the metal around me, the car swaying wildly. I think I merely whimpered, reciting no prayers, making no brave resolutions, experiencing no more than pure, animal terror.

Then the car thumped to a halt, the hatch opened, and more strong hands lifted me out, and held me against the blasting wind and rain.

I caught sight, again by the flash of lightning, of the rescue car already out upon its return journey; and our ship, aground on a reef, rolled partway onto its side at a

perilous angle.

But then there came another crack and an awful tearing sound. The entire vessel collapsed into itself, as if a gigantic hand had crushed a flimsy wooden model. A wave washed over the reef as if no ship had ever existed there.

The rescue car clanged forlornly on the rocks below.

There, *then*, I made my departure from this life.

Yet I remember a further ride in a dark, swaying conveyance, rain rattling all around; but this time I was in a carriage, alone it seemed, shivering in the cold and wet; and then I was somehow not alone. There were other people with me, all of them very pale, their faces almost aglow, as when the candle burns low and you can see a little light through the cavity of wax just before the flame gutters out.

There was a boy, about my own age, his face very pale, his eyes very dark, inscrutable, and somehow frightening. He too was streaming with wet, his long hair plastered to the sides of his face. His clothing was in tatters. I could see the whole of his naked chest – how terribly thin he was, as was the ragged girl beside him.

With them, too, huddled a heavy, older woman, soaking wet, but heavily clad. I liked her least of all. She had a face like a luminous toad. She reached out to touch me, as if to calm me or feel my forehead, but when I struggled to ward her off, I caught hold of her forearm. It felt *wrong*, too soft, cold, horribly like – even now I grasp for the right analogy – like wet sand stuffed into a sausage skin rather than living flesh.

I tried to say something. I wanted to know who they were.

But the boy and girl spoke first, in unison.

"Mother, may we have him? He is so warm."

"No, not like that. He is the one who was sent for. He shall come to us when it is time."

Even so, the two children slid to either side of me on the seat and took me by my hands. I could not resist them. Their touch was so cold it burned. All warmth and life seemed to drain out of me. I fell forward into the fat woman's hideous lap, and I distinctly remember her fingers, like worms, wriggling through my hair as she stroked me gently and croaked what might have been some kind of lullaby.

I fell into a delirium after that, days and nights passing like alternately dark and light leaves of a book, blown by the wind. Faces hovered like phantom moons, strangely-accented voices clucking expressions of pity from which I took no comfort. I heard the wind whistling in my ears, endlessly, as if the tempest were now inside my head.

Further journeys followed, by rail and by carriage. I was warm now, bundled like a baby, cared for by grim, plainly clad adults whom I took to be servants of some kind.

Someone had pressed a Bible into my hands, and for all that time I would not let it go. I think my attendants tried to take it from me, but I screamed and struggled, and they desisted.

In one of my more lucid moments, as I gazed out a window at fields and hedgerows racing by, I remembered how my mother used to open her Bible randomly, close

her eyes, then point to a passage, as if she could receive special messages from Providence by this means.

Now I tried it.

The first one read: *Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.*

And again:

Shall these bones live?

My memory and my mental coherence improved considerably when I awoke in a warm bed, beneath a high, dark canopy. Sunlight filtered in through dusty curtains. I slid out of bed, barefoot on soft carpet, made my way to the window and drew the curtains wide. The sunlight dazzled, and for an instant I had to look away, before my eyes adjusted and I saw that I was high up, in a tower perhaps. Below I could see a garden that seemed rather ill-kept, strewn with leaves and branches. Beyond that, a stone wall surrounded what almost looked like a forest. It took me a while to discern that this was actually a hedge-maze, abandoned and allowed to grow wild. Here and there within it, I caught glimpses of occasional stone roofs or domes, doubtless old pleasure-buildings, but more likely, it seemed to my fancy just then, the ruins of ancient, pagan temples – for I had read that Britain had once been part of the Roman Empire, and therefore once a pagan country, where idols were worshipped.

Beyond the wall and the maze, the green countryside rolled like a calm sea to the feet of distant hills.

I knew, of course where I was. This could only be Blessingleigh Hall, the intended destination of my parents' journey, the home of that same Lord Blessingleigh whose very existence we had never suspected until he wrote to my father, explaining himself to be a long-lost relative desirous of making our acquaintance, enclosing a considerable sum of money, and *commanding* our attendance. It seemed, at first, absurd. I remember my mother protesting that we were Americans, citizens of a Republic which proudly disdained such things as lords. Yet somehow, despite the First and Second Wars of Independence, there remains in the American blood some trace of that feudal slavishness which makes one listen with respect when an educated English voice speaks and come at once when an English lord commands.

Tragedy had followed, but, in obedience to command, here I was.

I turned back into the room, waiting again for my eyes to adjust – for somehow the sunlight did not penetrate the gloom very far. I saw thick hangings and much clutter, and even – I chuckled at the sheer *expectedness* of it – a suit of medieval armour standing in one corner. I was more delighted, even amazed by the sight of my own travelling trunk, which must have somehow been salvaged from the wreck, on a stand by the foot of the bed, and my Bible placed neatly atop that.

Quickly I put the Bible aside, opened the trunk, and got my clothes out. Everything was dry, and smelled only faintly of seawater. I slid out of the nightgown I'd found myself wearing and dressed, feeling more confident than. I placed the Bible in my jacket pocket.

Then I ventured into the rest of the house, and what followed was, again like a dream or delirium. It seemed

I wandered for hours through vast corridors, looking into room after room of antique, dusty furnishings, some rooms almost in ruin, wallpaper peeling from the damp and ceilings sagging. I came to a long hall filled with strange instruments, scientific, I supposed, or maybe much older and alchemical. Beyond was a library, with tall, arched windows as in a cathedral, which provided a kind of half-light through dirty glass. I could barely make out row upon row of leather-bound books, some of them so massive I was not sure I could lift them if I were to take them down from the shelves.

I picked up a smaller book, holding it toward the light, then putting it away quickly when I saw that it was a copy of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* with particularly horrible illustrations.

Many of the others were in Latin, which I could puzzle out somewhat, or in languages I knew not at all, some of them manuscript books in scripts that seemed more like random flickings of the pen than any alphabet.

"He comes in here and he reads 'em all, and he learns what he learns from these books, which are wicked, and should be burned."

I looked up, startled, and saw, standing in the gloom by the windows, just out of the light, that same boy I had seen – or dreamed – in the carriage, on the night of my parents' death. I actually pinched myself, because people in stories I'd read did that when they weren't sure what they saw was real.

But the boy came toward me. He stepped in front of the arched windows, and for just a second my eyes played tricks and he seemed almost transparent and suffused with light; but I saw that his bare, muddy feet left prints in the dust on the floor. His trousers were either torn off, or ended just below the knees. Perhaps he wore the remnants of the costume of the previous century. The front of his shirt was gone. I could count his every rib. He seemed terribly dirty and covered with bruises.

I saw a movement in the corner of my eye. The girl joined him, emerging from the shadows at the other end of the row of windows. She too was barefoot, dirty, her dress a thin, shapeless rag, the bones of her shoulders visible through it.

"My brother and I want you to come and play," she said. *"Won't you come with us?"*

Her voice was strange and faint, as if she were speaking from much farther away. But somehow, this time, I did not fear her. Perhaps I had been through too many shocks already, and was beyond fear.

I merely said, "Who are you?"

She curtsied, and flashed a pretty smile, and said, *"My name is Amelia, and my brother is Tom, if it please you, Sir."*

I thought, out of pity, to give my jacket to her or perhaps to her brother. Then I felt the Bible in my pocket. I thought to show them how you could open it up and point to a verse.

But heavy footsteps approached. I looked up, and Tom and Amelia were gone. I had the Bible open in my hand. Again my eye caught the verse, *Shall these bones live?*

A solid hand seized me by the back of the collar and

hauled me around as if I were a truant.

"Ah, there ye are. Mustn't keep His Lordship waiting."

This was one of the household servants, a tall, grim man who handled me as he might a stray kitten.

"Come along." He saw the book in my hands. *"At your studies? Very good. Time for that later."*

So it was that I was half led, half carried into the dining room, where Lord Blessingleigh, my benefactor, now my guardian, and I couldn't help but feel my *owner*, awaited. So I met him for the first time, though I had heard his name so often before, in dreams filled with my parents' voices.

He sat at a long table, half-concealed in shadows, and did not rise when I came in. The servant hastily departed.

I stood before the table, clutching my Bible rather uselessly in both hands. I could discern Lord Blessingleigh's massive brow, his black hair shaped like the mane of a lion, his impenetrably dark eyes, and his beard, black and streaked with grey. When he stirred one of his hands looked more like a massive shape of gnarled wood than living flesh.

His voice thundered. *"Put the... the book away. Sit down. Have your breakfast."*

I slid the Bible into my pocket, and had the strange feeling that His Lordship was somehow relieved when it was out of sight. I sat down.

I realized that I was almost faint with hunger. The soup before me was warm and good. I began eating at once, not saying grace, not even looking up.

The tone in his voice was now of amusement. *"You shall learn manners later. You shall learn many things."*

I looked up and saw that he was pointing with a cane to a series of portraits that lined the wall of the room. The nearest, I could just make out, showed a bearded man very much like my host, but in a costume such as I'd seen in illustrated editions of Shakespeare.

"That is Black Daniel, the first Baron Blessingleigh, the founder of our illustrious line, of which I am the 14th descendant. He served King Henry the Seventh well and long and faithfully, performing special services, for he was a man of peculiar learning who knew the secret arts. Did you know, boy, that there were witches and ghosts and goblins abroad in those days, and Black Daniel protected the king from them, and served his son Henry the Eighth in the same way, showing him how to spy on his enemies by means of a magic sphere? In the reign of Elizabeth, he used another name – But I say too much, and not enough. You and I come from a distinguished family, we do, Jimmy –"

It was a shock, almost a violation, to hear him speak my name thus, with such familiarity and mock-affection.

I dropped my spoon into the soup bowl with a clatter.

Lord Blessingleigh leaned back into the shadows. He flashed white teeth. I think he was laughing at me.

Only after several minutes did I resume eating, sopping up the rest of my soup with a piece of bread, for I was still famished. And Lord Blessingleigh continued his discourse, explaining how he was my only living relative now, and how our lives were joined together by fate, and I would remain here with him forever. It didn't make

sense. I had aunts, uncles, and cousins back in America. But he spoke as if America did not exist, and told how he had discovered me, like a long-lost treasure, by careful study of genealogical and astrological charts and had therefore summoned me, like something a magician conjures out of the air, to come to him because of *his need*. Never once did he speak of any affection, any consideration for what I might want out of my life. I felt a *thing* before him, and I am sure he thought of me that way. My dislike of him was instantaneous and intense. When he seemed to be congratulating himself on *how perfectly everything had worked out*, I wondered to myself if he had murdered my parents, as if he indeed had conjured the storm to wreck the ship and then break it to splinters after I alone had been rescued.

I would live with him for all my life, he told me. He said nothing about my being happy.

I gazed down into my empty soup bowl, trying not to weep.

After a while Lord Blessingleigh reached over with the tip of his cane, raised up my chin and said, "So silent, my Jimmy? Wouldn't it be polite to hold up your end of the conversation?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Then say something."

I couldn't think of anything. I grasped vainly. I thought of the maze I'd seen from my bedroom window. I described it.

"Are those really temples?" I asked.

Lord Blessingleigh's reaction was instantaneous and astonishing. His cane slashed through the air, an inch in front of my nose, shattering my soup bowl. Again his voice was like the thunder of a god – not the Christian God, but some terrible other.

"Again I command you. Never go into that place! Never speak of it! Never look on it! If you disobey, I shall be very displeased."

He rose then. He towered over me. I thought for an instant that he might just split my skull with his cane and get matters over with. Indeed, he trembled with wrath, but then calmed himself, and left the room.

Later, the same servant who had brought me now took me back to my chamber, ordered me to pack all my things into the travelling trunk, and take it with me, as I was never to sleep in this room again. Ceremoniously, he locked the door with a heavy, iron key, then urged me up several flights of stairs, into a cramped room under the eaves – probably servant's quarters in more populous times, or else a storage space. There I was to reside from now on. A straw mattress lay on the floor, a couple of thin blankets tossed over it.

I sat there alone for a time, reading my Bible by the dim light that came in through the ancient, diamond-shaped panes of glass in the room's tiny window.

I came to the verse, *That which dieth not*.

Later in the day, I ventured out, and was not molested. I explored much more of the house, but the cellars were forbidden to me, I soon learned from the interference of servants, who were never in evidence except when I

transgressed in some way. Nor was I to venture into that entire wing where Lord Blessingleigh dwelt and did his "important work," whatever that was.

I came again to the library, and pulled down a book from the shelves which looked like a Bible from its binding, but definitely was not. I opened to a page at random. From the barbarous black lettering and strangely written Latin I translated: *The devil-bought hastes not from this charnel clay, but fates and instructs the very worm that gnaws.*

And again, on another page: *...at the heart of the mystery findeth death and the gateway beyond death.*

I think it was that same night, or perhaps another, for days blended into weeks and I lost track of time, when I had a dream in which I heard faint footsteps on the stair outside my room, then fainter voices.

I sat up in bed and slowly opened the little hatch to the tin lamp by my bedside.

The room's door swung gently inward.

Tom and his sister Amelia stood there, as I had seen them before, ragged, dirty and barefoot. As I could see my own breath in the room, I thought they must be terribly cold, but both were smiling.

"Will you come with us?"

"To play?"

"It is a kind of game."

They took me by either hand, and, yes, their touch was cold, yet somehow, because of it, I felt no other cold. I got up, clad only in my nightgown, barefoot as they, and let them lead me down the stairs, then along many passages I did not know. Once we were in a winding, stone tunnel, and the walls were covered with ice. We came to a smashed window. They climbed out, and I followed them, mindful of the glass, but thinking, *This is a dream and I cannot cut myself in a dream*. Nevertheless, there was blood on my hands, and streaming down my shins afterwards, as I stood ankle-deep in snow on a rooftop. It was fully winter now. Snow had been falling, off and on, for days. As long as Tom or Amelia held me by the hand, I felt no cold, nor pain. When, of necessity, they let go of me, I felt the cold which numbed the pain. Still I followed them, as we climbed perilously down a trellis-work, amid ivy, then slid across another roof and dropped into a pathway.

I recognized the place. This was the ill-kept garden I had seen from my window that first morning. I looked up now, trying to make out my old window, but could not. There were so many rooms and towers that I was lost among them.

"Come with us," Amelia whispered, and she and Tom led me to the gate of that forbidden enclosure, which contained the overgrown maze. Moonlight reflected off the snow made the world almost as bright as day, though without colour, grey upon grey upon darker grey.

The gate was locked with a heavy, ancient chain. Yet Tom and Amelia slid through the horizontal bars with ease, I guess, because they were so thin.

I couldn't fit through. I pushed, but I couldn't fit.

Tom and Amelia let go of me then, and the cold returned. My feet burned with it, but this was only a dream, I told myself, and I couldn't freeze to death in a dream.

"Come with us! Come with us!"

I tried. But I couldn't. And somehow, as if they were leaves swept away on a wind, Tom and Amelia left me. I saw them running, rags flapping, into the maze. Others followed them where I could not, from out of the surrounding bushes, out of the stones of the wall and out of the air itself perhaps. First came their bloated mother, who wobbled like a sack as she ran, then many others, a lot of children, several grown men and women, some of them ragged, almost naked, others in strange costumes from barbarous times, all of them running, streaming into the maze, groping ahead in the darkness for something they both feared and earnestly sought, some final black mystery on the other side of dreams and death which would release them all at last from this long, long race. It was a game. Amelia and Tom had assured me it was a game, a kind of hide-and-go-seek, but it was played, I thought, in terrible earnest.

And so, in my dream, I tried to follow them, and but was stuck at the gate, and I could only watch the others running with them. In my dream I could see *into* the maze for a distance, as if the hedges had become mist. I saw the runners going around and around, their footsteps absolutely silent. I could not tell if they made any prints in the snow. I supposed they wouldn't have to, in a dream.

But it wasn't quite a dream any longer that morning, when the servants found me clinging to the iron gate my face and hands stuck to the metal with the cold, my legs and feet numb as stone.

"The Master will warm ye up," they said, and indeed he did, for I felt the full fury of Lord Blessingleigh's cane. He beat me until I was warm with my own streaming blood. I think he broke bones. After a time, the pain seemed to be somewhere else and the sound reminded me of my mother beating a rug with a broom handle.

Then Lord Blessingleigh's face seemed to swim at me from out of a fiery sky, and he spoke words which frightened me more than anything else he had ever said.

"Don't be in such a hurry to join them."

I spent a long time in delirium after that, tended in my high, cramped, cold room by the servants, who brought me meals and changed bandages when that needed done, but spoke no word of comfort, nor answered my entreaties with any but with the most cursory replies. I was dead now, I thought. I was in my grave, buried alive atop a tower in Blessingleigh Hall, and I would never leave, except as Tom and Amelia and their mother did, whose too-soft body felt like cold sand stuffed in an animate sausage skin when she came at night to comfort me. She cooed over me. She ran her fingers through my hair and I did not flinch. She hugged me against her cold breast and rocked me back and forth, singing soft songs.

And she spoke of Lord Blessingleigh and of her time with him, when she had been, incredibly, his *wife*, upon whom his Lordship had sired Tom and Amelia, who were his *natural children*, in so far as anything about him or done by him could be called "natural." He was not, I gathered, a loving father.

"Oh, he was a bad one," she went on. "He sold himself

to Satan and worse long, long ago. His soul is utterly black, and that is why he does not die, because he is already dead in his soul, and even the Devil has more use for him on Earth than in Hell... And what a fool I was to be blinded by his promises. I think he needed me like some instrument in his laboratory, to be thrown away when I'm no more use. Oh, yes, I got what was coming to me, and I deserved it, but God knows he showed no mercy to the children, not to his own, nor to any other... though he always said that his own would serve him better. There was many more that came after me."

In my delirium, I attempted rationality. If I calculated Tom and Amelia's apparent ages...

"How long ago was this?"

"Long and long ago."

I grasped at another straw. "What year?"

"I don't know about years."

She told me many things which were impossible, but I had become accustomed to the impossible by then.

Indeed, it seemed so when the servants came to me, and, ascertaining that I was well enough to get up, commanded me to dress in my best clothes, because it was nearly *Christmas* and his Lordship wished to take me into town.

So I dressed. I could walk, though with a limp. Grim-faced, as solemn as any of the servants who accompanied us, I rode with Lord Blessingleigh into the nearby town, where, as if he were the most jovial of souls, he greeted the townspeople and wished them the compliments of the season. We went into stores. He transacted trivial business, but if ever I saw something I might have wanted, whether a sweet or a book or whatever, I quickly looked away, because I knew I could not have it. No one buys anything for dead boys, after all.

I spoke to no one. Lord Blessingleigh laughed and chided me to be polite, to greet this or that person. He explained that I was a little bewildered having come home after being away at school for several years. He said I limped because I'd had a riding accident. He said I was his *son*.

And he said, too, that I might be going away again soon.

I wanted to start screaming, to beg the townspeople to rescue me. But I didn't. I knew Lord Blessingleigh would only say that I was mad, and would be going away all the sooner.

Besides, I know they wouldn't have helped me.

I know they feared him as much as I did.

Once, in a half-guarded moment, I drifted away, pretending to look at some magazines, and I heard two women talking.

"How can such as *him* have a *son*?"

"Oh, he's had lots of *sons*. Lots of them. God have pity on them all."

Later, in my loft, Tom and Amelia's mother explained that God didn't have pity on even one of them. She explained that Lord Blessingleigh hadn't had pity on her either, when he'd strangled her one night and tossed her over a wall, nor on the children, when he bricked them up in the cellar and left them to starve, "because he wants to *come back*, you see, as his own son, pretending he's the tenth

Baron or the 13th or whatever, but I will tell ye his secret, which is that he is none of those. He is the *first*."

Of course that sort of thing only makes sense when one is in a delirium, or dead, and so it was very clear to me. And so I dreamed that I ran in the snowy maze beyond the garden wall, barefoot in my nightgown with Tom and Amelia, in the company of many more, and all of us sought the dark heart of the maze, which was both our doom and our salvation.

That made perfect sense, now that I had despaired, now that I was dead or in a delirium or mad.

It made perfect sense when Tom and Amelia's mother came to me and crouched by my bedside, and ran her cold, soft fingers through my hair, and explained that I had been summoned by Lord Blessingleigh for his design, which was to show me to the townspeople as his son, then hide both of us away for a time, until he reappeared in a *younger guise*, which he could do, and announced that the 14th master of Blessingleigh Hall had died and he was now the 15th. She told me that somehow he would steal life from me, as he had stolen it from so many others, and go on and on, as he had for 300 years and more. But I was under her protection, she told me, and of the *others* who ran beyond the courtyard wall, and they would help me.

And she told me what I had to do.

If I say that I parted from this life on the night of the shipwreck, let me say that mine was a multiple death. I also died when I clung to the iron gate before the maze, and again when His Lordship beat me, then once more when he took me into town and presented me as his "son," and yet again when I listened for long hours to the words of His Lordship's former wife, whose name was Mistress Kate in the old days, when she'd been a tavern harlot before she became, suddenly and inexplicably, a baroness, and bore two children within charnel wedlock.

And surely my soul died on the day when I went into the forbidden wing of the house where Lord Blessingleigh conducted his "researches," fought and squirmed my way past the servants, and pounded on the great laboratory door demanding that my "father" and tormentor come forth.

And he came forth, leaning on his cane, swaying back and forth slowly, muttering again in a bemused tone, "Well, well, well, what have we here?"

I thought that with his great mane of hair, as he loomed over me in the semi-darkness of the corridor, he looked like some terrible storm cloud gathering its fury.

I *knelt* before him, and confessed abjectly how I had understood the folly of offering him any resistance, nay, the *wrongness*, for surely he was the great master of all secret learning, and more powerful than life and death. I resisted, just barely, saying that he was more powerful than God, but that was what I meant, and I am sure he took my meaning.

"How very... interesting," he said. "Then what am I to conclude about you, Jimmy?"

Now I boldly stood up.

"Conclude that I have come to admire you, Sir, that I want to join you in your researches, to become *like* you, and truly your son."

He smiled. He flashed white teeth. I think he was about to laugh, then I made for him the Voorish Sign, and spoke of what I had read in that ancient black-lettered book in the library, then, from *Nemesis 1:1*, quoted: "*I would learn the secret ways and converse with the dead, who are wise.*"

Now Lord Blessingleigh seemed genuinely intrigued. He stood aside and bade me enter his sanctum, which I had never seen before – a high, stone vaulted room lined with shelves filled with books and apparatus. There were diagrams painted on the bare floor, and a long stone box on a table. But there were also comfortable chairs by a large, roaring fireplace.

The Lord bade me sit, and I sat.

"So you have... changed?"

I took my Bible out of my waistcoat pocket. For an instant the look on Lord Blessingleigh's face was one of startled disgust, but before he could say anything I calmly tossed the book into the fire.

"*When I became a man*," I said, "*I put aside childish things.*"

Now he smiled broadly, and, yes, he did laugh. "You have become a man, so suddenly?"

"If you will guide me... Father."

Now he leaned forward and took my hand gently between both of his, and held firmly, but did not hurt me.

"You surprise me, Jimmy."

"I hope I please you, Sir."

"Yes, you do."

If I died one more time, in that instant, it was a willing and necessary death, as Mistress Kate had explained to me.

So I grew to become a man. First, tutors were brought in to continue my education, a dour, close-lipped lot, always from far away, often replaced suddenly. The servants, too, tended to be replaced suddenly. I helped my Father bury some of them in the cellars.

I grew in knowledge, and power, and in the hardness of my heart, until I could only think of my soul as a burnt-out cinder, which had once been alive.

This pleased my Father greatly.

Together we learned the languages of the living and the dead, and spoke with persons and powers we summoned out of the air or from beneath the earth. We journeyed together, across Europe in secret, to meet with certain other adepts in a castle in Hungary. We were joined in a secret brotherhood, whose name may not be spoken or ever written down. Finally we observed the forbidden rites of Nephren-Ka, in the Vale of Hadoth by the Nile, and called things out of the night in the deserts of Arabia.

After a while I stopped feeling my dead soul, though each night I ran the dream-race with Mistress Kate and her children and with all the others in the endless, ruined maze, and I never wavered from my purpose.

There wasn't even any pain any more. I went on, like an inanimate, hurled missile. I saw my real Papa and my Mother in a dream, just once, as I remembered them from childhood, but in that dream they did not speak, and I could find nothing to say to them, and they came to me no more.

But in Lord Blessingleigh's heart there stirred something which astonished even him. We would sit conversing for long hours into the night, not always discussing occult matters either, but merely talking for the sake of comfort, as he told me again and again how he had never had such a companion as myself, closer to him than any natural son. He even tried to recall his own childhood, so long ago, and tell me stories which amused him, the import of which I often did not understand.

I understood enough, that in his own twisted and cruel way, he had come to *love* me, though it remained unspoken between us that he would not waver from his purpose any more than I would waver from mine, however much he, or I, might have regrets.

This was clear on a dark night in a certain season, toward the ending of my 20th year, when all the tall windows of my Master's study were thrown open, and the house was filled with howling wind, and That which dwelt in the sarcophagus on the tabletop cried out to announce the return of the Great Terror which demanded a price when it renewed the gift of immortality to its most faithful servant, the Lord of Blessingleigh Hall.

We called it down from the sky. We spoke its name. Incredibly, there were tears on Lord Blessingleigh's face at the very end, as he placed his hands on my shoulders and began to explain, almost apologetically, how he would have preferred to keep me at his side forever, but that was, alas, not possible, as he and surely I had understood from the very first; for the Powers of the Dark Air demand flesh of their servants' flesh and bone of their servants' bone, and as his genealogical studies had demonstrated, I would just barely do.

He hoped I would understand. But he did not waver from his purpose.

Nor did I waver from mine as I swiftly brushed his hands aside, drew a pistol out of my waistcoat pocket, and shot him squarely between the eyes, at a range of no more than a couple of inches.

The astonished look on his face seemed to say that he was prepared for spells and conjurations and demonic sendings, for curses written in arcane runes or chanted out of the black book amid standing stones – but, *a pistol?*

As he had remarked on that day when I first came to his study, I was capable of surprising him.

I say that I died one last time that night, though it is more comforting to think that I had perished eight years before in a shipwreck, and all that followed was but a terminal nightmare in a drowning child's mind.

My labours were almost done. With a ritual scimitar we had brought back from the east, I cut off Lord Blessingleigh's head and let his blood pour out to appease the Terror which paced back and forth in the high, vaulted room. It devoured most of his corpse. I burned certain papers and books in the great fireplace, intending to leave the house empty of anything which could renew the evil which had so long infested it. When one of the most loyal servants tried to stop me, I killed him too, and heaved his body onto the fire.

Then I paused, and wrote out this account of my doings,

and have come to the realization that *there is no ending*, for in that instant the blood poured out *I* became the Lord of Blessingleigh Hall and the recipient of the Terror's gift.

I can only say that Tom and Amelia and their mother have rejoined me. I shall let their cold hands guide me, beyond the garden wall, into the hedge-maze, and there we shall run in the darkness, in the company of so many others, in the night that never ends, until at last we come to the place that even Lord Blessingleigh feared to look upon – but I bear his head with me, and I'll *make* him look. His head is still alive, its eyes wide, rolling. Nothing he has cursed can ever truly *cease*, not even himself, for is it not written, *that is not dead which can eternal lie?* So I shall take him with me, to the uttermost Centre, where dwells the Sentient Chaos which shall guide us into a new world beyond that Void which has no name and a thousand names, about which I read long ago in the black-lettered book.

Darrell Schweitzer's last stories here were "The Fire Eggs" (issue 153; reprinted in one of the year's-best anthologies) and "Envy, the Gardens of Ynath, and the Sin of Cain" (issue 178). A longtime resident of Pennsylvania, he has worked as a literary agent and is co-editor with George Scithers of the small-press magazine *Weird Tales*. He has also written many books – novels, short-story collections, poetry and non-fiction.

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ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Hordes of children's writers made merry at a 10 Downing Street reception on 2 December. Wine flowed freely, various Blair offspring were glimpsed, and Tony B. himself assured the massed literati that they did valuable work and that this was a great responsibility, at which a voice behind Diana Wynne Jones growled "Yes, we know." Other author sightings included Joan Aiken, Peter Dickinson, Philippa Pearce and the inescapable Terry Pratchett. Diana's usual attendant disasters were the failure of No. 10's electronic door-opener ("The polite policeman said, 'I think you'll have to knock at the door, madam'", a canapé accident ("I took a rice thing from one of the small ladies and it came open and rice went all up my sleeve, like gummy little beetles") and momentary panic when the knob fell off the bolt in the ladies' loo. Only this column brings you the facts.

THE CALTRAPS OF TIME

Douglas Adams may be looking over the shoulder of his biographer M. J. Simpson: "I got the first proofs of *Hitchhiker* through last week and was rather disturbed to find that, according to the title page, it's the autobiography of Douglas Adams. Perhaps I'm channelling his spirit."

John Cleese is writing a new 96-page Superman comic, to be called *True Brit*. One hotly unrumoured possibility is that thanks to the impish spells of Mr Mxyzptlk, Superman will find himself resistlessly compelled – even while fighting crime – to do the silly walk.

Diana Wynne Jones discovers her roots: "I recently got sent a set of academic essays on my books, published as a slim volume and full of the most

extraordinary statements. My favourite is the assertion that I am 'rooted in fluidity.' Obviously hydroponic, probably a lettuce, possibly a cabbage. A new light is cast."

Mike Moorcock plugs Poul Anderson at the expense of some other guy: "Just reviewed *The Broken Sword* for the *Guardian*, partly to answer H[umphrey] Carpenter's assertion that before Tolky there was nothing like it. My argument is that after *Broken Sword*, Tolky seemed tame."

Terry Pratchett has had many unexpected literary accolades in his time, but I think Michael Dirda's rave review of *Night Watch* in the *Washington Post* is the first that compares him with Chaucer. "Whan that Discworldle with his shoures sote..."

Margaret Weis, interviewed by *SF Weekly*, brags about her innovative fantasy worldbuilding. Apart from lots of dragons, "It is a kind of atypical fantasy world in that there are just humans. No elves, no dwarves – at least not yet." Always keep something in reserve, eh?

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

As Others See Us. "There are more nutters on the road than at a *Star Trek* Convention." (Quentin Wilson, *Britain's Worst Driver*, Channel 5)

Still More Awards. *Whitbread Prize*: yet again this literary award lists genre material in its children's category. Shortlist: Julie Bertagna, *Exodus*; Hilary McKay, *Saffy's Angel*; Celia Rees, *Sorceress*; Philip Reeve, *Mortal Engines*. Both *Exodus* and *Mortal Engines* are sf. • **National Book Award (US)**: Nancy Farmer won the Young People's Literature category with her sf novel *The House of the Scorpion*.

Publishers and Sinners. Just to confuse us all, Tor Books UK is launching in March 2003 as an sf/fantasy imprint of Pan Macmillan.

R.I.P. **Mal Ashworth**, UK fan since the 1950s, died in an Otley pub on 27 November; he was 69. Mal's chief fanzines were *Bem* (1954-59) and *Rot* (1955-63), the latter briefly revived in 1984. • **Hilary Bader**, Emmy-winning US comics and TV scriptwriter who wrote for *Star Trek: TNG*, *ST: Voyager*, *Xena* and other genre series, died from cancer on 7 November; she was 50. • **James Coburn** (1928-2002), Oscar-winning US actor whose sf films were *The President's Analyst* (1967) and *Looker* (1981), died at age 74 on 19 November, following a heart attack. • **Bert Granet**, the US TV producer responsible for *The Twilight Zone*, died on 15 November aged 92. • **Jerry**

Sohl (1913-2002), US sf author and TV scriptwriter, died on 4 November aged 88. His first sf story (in *Galaxy*) and his debut sf novel *The Haploids* both appeared in 1952; he later wrote for *The Twilight Zone* and *Star Trek*. • **Lionel Trippett** (1935-2002), CND campaigner who in the 1970s was a London sf editor at Arrow and Mayflower, died on 31 July; he was 66.

Copyrights and Wrongs. Emily Somma, a Canadian author, has published a distant sequel to *Peter Pan* using some of the original Sir James Barrie characters. This is fine in Canada, where Barrie's work entered the public domain 50 years after his death in 1937. The same should apply in the USA, but Great Ormond Street Hospital – granted the *Peter Pan* copyright in perpetuity by Parliament – is unhappy. Its New York lawyers have demanded that Somma cease and desist, which cuts little ice in Canada, and are attempting to block distribution of her *After the Rain: A New Adventure for Peter Pan* in the United States, where certain Hollywood interests are on the hospital's side...

Small Press. *3SF* magazine, edited by Liz Holliday for Ben Jeapes of Big Engine, was launched at Novacon in November, and again in London in December. Contact 31 Shottsford, Wesssex Gdns, London, W2 5LG (editorial); PO Box 185, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 1GR (subs). • *Spectrum SF* reached its ninth quarterly issue, in which publisher/editor Paul Fraser notes that the future schedule will be "occasional," say twice a year. No unsolicited submissions. Contact 53 Waverley Pk, Kirkintilloch, Glasgow, G66 2BL.

Thog's Masterclass. *Sensitive Mainstream Dept.* "[They] walked off in separate directions through the chaparral to stand spraddlelegged clutching their knees and vomiting. The browsing horses jerked their heads up. It was no sound they'd ever heard before. In the gray twilight those retchings seemed to echo like the calls of some rude provisional species loosed upon that waste. Something imperfect and malformed lodged in the heart of being. A thing smirking deep in the eyes of grace itself like a gorgon in an autumn pool." (Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 1992) • **Neat Tricks Dept.** "He started pushing her buttocks up until they had almost disconnected." (Nancy Taylor Rosenberg, *Interest of Justice*, 1993) • "His nose wrinkled at the smell of blood and sought permission to cover the body with a sheet." (Peter Tremayne, "Methought You Saw a Serpent," in *Shakespearean Detectives* ed. Mike Ashley, 1998)

In one sense, Octavia Butler is very easy to introduce. She is the author of *Wild Seed*, *Kindred*, *Clay's Ark*, the "Xenogenesis" novels, *The Parable of the Sower*, *The Parable of the Talents*, and several more of the most thoughtful and passionate novels in our field. She was born in 1947, sold her first story to the anthology *Clarion* edited by Robin Scott Wilson (having attended the Clarion Writers' Workshop) and published her first novel, *Patternmaster*, in 1976. She has attracted a good deal of critical attention. Other than that, all I can say is that in person she seems to be a quietly self-assured and unassuming person, the complete opposite of the sort of writer who cuts a flamboyant swath through a convention crowd and is the subject of countless anecdotes. You don't tell Octavia Butler stories. You read them – the ones she has written.

This interview was done at Eeriecon, in Niagara Falls, New York, April 21, 2002, where Octavia and I were both guests of honour, and was conducted in front of the convention as her guest-of-honour presentation.

Schweitzer: To sort out your awards...

Butler: I won a Nebula for "Bloodchild" and for *The Parable of the Sower*, and I won a Hugo for "Bloodchild" and "Speech Sounds."

Schweitzer: So you have an impressively-stocked mantelpiece already.

Butler: I wish I had a mantel. It would be nice to put things up there. I just finally bought a house and it has no mantel. But it's funny to get three awards for my short stories when I'm essentially a novelist.

Schweitzer: But you must have started short.

Butler: I started writing short stories when I was very young. I started trying to sell them when I was 13. Fortunately nobody wanted to buy them. By the time I was able to sell anything, the first two things I sold were short stories, but thereafter I sold novels. "Thereafter" being five years later. I was one of the early Clarionites. I went to Clarion 1970. I sold two short stories, my very first sales, and I was so happy because then I knew I was a writer, and I would go home and write things, and people would buy them, and I'd be set for life. And it really hurt me when I didn't sell another word for five years.

Schweitzer: And one of those early stories was to have been in *Last Dangerous Visions*...

Butler: That is the one that you'll never see. Everybody knows about *Last Dangerous Visions*, I assume?

Watching the Story Happen

Octavia Butler
interviewed by
Darrell Schweitzer

Schweitzer: It's sort of the Flying Dutchman of science fiction.

Butler: It's like, for a while I sort of hoped it would come out. Now, I'm really glad it didn't. Who wants their student work to come out 25 years later?

Schweitzer: You mentioned in the afterword to your story-collection, *Bloodchild*, that when you were a kid and you were trying to write, your



elder relatives were telling you, "Oh nonsense. You can't do this..."

Butler: It's kind of hard to convince people who came through the Depression the hard way that you're going to earn a living telling stories. What they're telling you is, "Grow up. Get a nice job with a salary and a pension." They couldn't figure out why I didn't think this was a good idea. I had a lot of jobs and I got to write about some of them later in *Kindred*. I gave them to my character. This is what writers do with their troubles and the unpleasantnesses of life. We give them to our characters. It makes them worthwhile.

I quit all those jobs. I think the very last one, after I'd sold three novels and still had to do horrible little jobs, was working in a hospital laundry in August. Thoroughly unpleasant.

Schweitzer: In the Afterword to *Bloodchild* you talk about the need for persistence...

Butler: I'd done an essay on habits, good habits for would-be writers to establish. I said the most important one is persistence. That is also what I say when I am asked what talent I think is most important for a writer: just to keep at it until you finally do have some success. One of my favourite teachers, Harlan Ellison, used to say, "If anything can stop you from being a writer, don't be one." I suspect that goes without saying. There are so many things out there that are out to stop you. It's not a conspiracy or anything, but it's just so difficult to become a writer and live on your writing. So persistence is a good... "talent" may not be the right word... a good habit to develop.

Schweitzer: One thing I wanted to ask you about from the same Afterword is where you said that persistence is more important than talent. I have certainly known wannabes who had every conceivable writerly virtue except talent. I know somebody who is a Clarion graduate, too, who has been beating his head against the wall for the past 25 years. He's never sold a word. I think he simply doesn't have it.

Butler: There may be another skill that he doesn't have, and that's learning from his mistakes. I remember having a Clarion student who told me she'd written something like eight unpublished novels. The problem was, she was good, but she would refuse to learn from her mistakes. She would just trash whatever it was and start again on something else. Your friend might be doing that.

I justify saying that talent may be unimportant by suggesting that students go read the books on the best-seller list and see who else doesn't

have any talent.

Schweitzer: Except for the celebrities who have the books ghosted for them, surely any published writer has to have a certain narrative ability?

Butler: You'd think so, wouldn't you. I've read some unbelievably poorly-written stuff and I finally realized that good writing is just not a requirement, unfortunately.

Schweitzer: Let me bounce something off you. I have the Theory of Audience Starvation, which would account for a writer as bad as, say, James Fenimore Cooper, who, as you know, was just dreadful in every conceivable way, *but he was writing about what the audience wanted to read about*. If he had been writing conventional romances, set in Europe, he wouldn't have been publishable.

Butler: I agree. I have been reading romances recently. [Laughs.] Not the kind you're talking about, but I just wanted to see what's out there and why are people buying it. I realized that there is absolutely nothing in the books that is of any quality at all *except* the romance.

Schweitzer: It's got to have something the readers want. I'd suggest that if Tom Clancy wrote westerns, we'd never have heard of him. He came along at the time when the audience wanted technothrillers and he was competent enough to make himself intelligible.

Butler: He's also a decent storyteller, and that's important. I think the most important thing a writer can do is tell a good story. If you don't do that, whatever else you do is liable not to be noticed.

Schweitzer: If you just write beautifully textured prose and there is no story, people will go to sleep after a while.

Butler: To me, that is what writer's block is. You're writing really well. You're getting nowhere. Hundreds of pages go by. Nothing much happens. To me, that's writer's block. I know, because I've been in the throes of one for a while, and I finally decided to quit what I was doing and write a non-fiction piece.

Schweitzer: Is that the unconscious telling you that the novel you're writing isn't ready yet?

Butler: Either that it isn't ready yet, or that it just isn't a novel. There's always that. I have an unpublished novel called *Blindsight*, which no one will ever see, except those few people who work for a certain publisher. It is no good because it doesn't go anywhere. I have a character and he does stuff, and

that's pretty much it. I've got this blind psychic and he does stuff. Some of it is interesting stuff, but it doesn't really get anywhere in particular.

Schweitzer: Do you think you can come back to it someday and find the plot?

Butler: No. Some things just should be let alone, I think. I rewrote it many times. This was on a manual typewriter. It was before computers. I rewrote it many times, and I'm done with it.

Schweitzer: Of course if you become *really* famous, after you're dead they'll either publish it as a fragment or farm it out to somebody.

Butler: I hope not. It's what I said. It's not really worth publishing. I realize that someone might want to do it just for money. My heir, the person who will control things after I'm dead might very well do it, but I'll haunt her if she does.

Schweitzer: This has happened to any number of other writers. I recall how E. Hoffmann Price, in old age, burned certain things in self-defence.

Butler: I can't do it. I find it very difficult to get rid of things. I am a natural packrat. My mother gave me this packrat gene. It just means that when I'm dead there'll be so much junk that my cousin, who is my heir, will be just swimming in it. After a while she'll probably just give up and burn it all. Which won't be a bad thing.

Schweitzer: Or she could bring in vast quantities of scholars who will catalogue it all.

Butler: She doesn't have the patience.

Schweitzer: Is there a university already collecting your papers?

Butler: Actually there is. I'm willing them, not to a university, but to the Huntingdon Library because they asked for them and because Pasadena is my home town. So whatever I put together and mark will go to them.

Schweitzer: Let's talk about the sciences you find interesting. A lot of the ones I've read have been based on biology, "Bloodchild," for instance. So, what attracts you to speculative biology?

Butler: No idea. I just follow my interests, and this has been an interest of mine for quite a long time. When I was in college I majored in quite a number of things for about five minutes each, and one of them was anthropology. I had the idea that I was going to be interested in cultural anthropology. Then I took that physical anthropology class and realized that what I was really interested in was evolutionary biology. I'm not

interested in it enough to actually go and do something with it, but enough to read about and write about. I can't tell you why. It's just true. I do follow my interests. If something attracts me, especially if it won't let me alone, I am happy to write about it.

Writers go through these periods of, you've got all these ideas and you're writing them, and then, after a while, you've written them, and you're refilling the well. I think I'm going through a period of refilling the well.

Schweitzer: Sprague de Camp used to say that as he got older, he had fewer ideas and so wrote more about them.

Butler: When I got the idea for *Patternmaster*, I was twelve years old. When I got the idea for *Mind of my Mind*, I was 15. I was 19 when I got the idea for *Survivor*, which you won't see – and I hope you haven't already seen it, because it's bad –

Schweitzer: Is that the one you once described as your *Star Trek* novel?

Butler: Yeah, because the human beings go off to another world and immediately begin intermarrying with the natives, something that happens all the time on *Star Trek*.

Schweitzer: And they all wear jumpsuits and the landscape looks like southern California... and then there's a shopping mall, right?

Butler: Not quite, but it's got its problems. But the reason I'm saying all this is that I got these ideas early on. I got the idea for *Kindred* while I was in college. This meant that when I finally began to sell, years later, I had all these ideas and I was working on them. They spawned other ideas. Then after a while, I'd written all that, and then I had to look around and see what else I wanted to do. That's when I wrote my "Xenogenesis" novels. I didn't know at first that there would be three of them, but I finally figured it out, three novels. It kind of worked out nicely. Then I got to the *Parable* books, and that was more difficult, because, well, they weren't something I'd lived with for a long time. It took me a while to get to the point of being able to write them. I had to get to know these characters. I had to get to know their world.

I guess that's what I'm doing right now. I have several ideas. I have been writing at them. I've been writing several hundred pages of non-novel, and that's why I'm doing the non-fiction right now. It doesn't require me to be inspired, or anything else. It just requires me to do the research.

Schweitzer: What's the non-fiction?

Butler: It's a name book, which is all I want to say about it, and it's *not* a

name dictionary. I'll say that. It's something I used to wish I had, and never found.

Schweitzer: Isn't that also the way one writes novel?

Butler: In a sense, yes. When I started writing, one of the things I wanted to do was write myself in, because I was reading a lot of science fiction. I used to have a teacher who said, "Young science-fiction writers read way too much science fiction." It was pretty much all I was reading. And I couldn't find me in there, so I wrote myself in.

Schweitzer: Did you have any perception at that time, as others have reported, that science fiction was supposed to be a man's game?

Butler: Not that. The nice thing about being an only child and a hermit is that I could imagine myself in all kinds of situations, and there was no one around to tell me I was being an idiot. And when my family finally did tell me I was an idiot, I didn't believe them, because by then I didn't believe them about much of anything.

Schweitzer: How did they react when you started publishing books?

Butler: They weren't impressed until I was able to quit that laundry job. No matter how many books you're publishing, if you're working at a hospital laundry, something's wrong... although I remember another writer and I corresponding, and he had dropped out. I said, "Why haven't I seen more from you?" He said, "Well, I didn't make anything on my first three books." My comment was, "Who makes anything on their first three books?"

I remember that the time I quit that laundry job, it was to go to a Worldcon in Phoenix. Figure back to when that was. [1978 – D.S.] I should have gotten more jobs, but I decided I was going to try to live as frugally as possible, and at that time you really could live very frugally. My rent was 100 dollars a month. So if you were content not to drive, and if you were content to wear the same clothes that you'd been getting along on for a long time... and there were other ways of not spending lots of money. I didn't eat potatoes for years after that.

I decided that I was going to live off the writing, somehow. My next novel was *Kindred*, which I didn't want to sell to Doubleday, because I got the same amount for the first three Doubleday books, and that same amount was \$1,750. Even then, that wasn't a lot of money. So I wanted to get more for *Kindred*, which I felt really was my best work to that time. And I wound up shopping it all over the place, and I ended up taking it back to Doubleday.

No one else wanted to take a chance on it, because nobody knew what it was. It didn't quite qualify as science fiction. It didn't qualify as anything else, really. They didn't know what it was, so they didn't want it, and so I wound up in the Doubleday trade department. I got a little more money and used it to hire myself a publicist, and I began to do a bit better.

Schweitzer: Now you're doing a lot better, it would seem. Your books are in a lot of stores, unlike those Doubleday books, which doubtless disappeared instantly and became fabulous collector's items.

Butler: Yes. People pay a lot of money for them now. Oh well... [Laughs.] I still have some of them, so, who knows? They're kind of part of my retirement.

Schweitzer: What is the genesis of the two *Parable* books? These are a bit of a departure...

Butler: No, they're not, really. They're another case of me trying to fix the world, trying to fix the human species. We seem so likely to destroy ourselves. We work so hard at doing things which will harm us. I figure that if we ever do die out as a species, it will be because of something we did, as opposed to the asteroid striking, or something.

I keep trying to find ways to fix us. In the "Xenogenesis" books, genetic engineering. In the earlier books, mental abilities, telepathy, that kind of thing. In the *Parable* books, I made a rule: no aliens, no powers, no humanity-altering genetic engineering, just what we've got to work with. So people have to find a way, using the tools we've got. The tool my character chooses is religion. It's not really different; it's just going at the same thing in a different way.

Schweitzer: I've heard you speak elsewhere and describe gloomy prognostications for the future, what you refer to as "the Burn." Could you describe that?

Butler: That's just something I was working on for the *Parable* books. It was renamed "the Apocalypse," then shortened to "the Pox." The Pox is the nasty part of history that happens as a result of all the problems that we're neglecting now, from illiteracy to drugs to global warming, that are likely to give us trouble in the future just because we're ignoring them now. Today's troubles that grow up into tomorrow's disasters. Unfortunately, a lot of them mature at the same time. That's "the Pox." It's supposed to be something that we're already working on. It's already happening now. It comes to maturity in the 2020s.

Schweitzer: Here we are in Niagara Falls in mid-April and it's 80 degrees out. It was 90 in Philadelphia.

Butler: We can enjoy it...

Schweitzer: We can, but when I was a kid, we had Spring.

Butler: I remember being on a television programme in Chicago where high-school children were allowed to ask questions, and somebody got me talking about global warming. And the other person on the programme said, "It's nothing really to worry about."

I asked, "How can you say that?"

He said that getting warmer is just not that much of a problem. It's been warmer than we're likely to get. Why worry about it?

Of course it has, but not while we were around with all our cities built on coastlines. I think that that attitude, of "it's nothing to worry about," and the tendency to treat each incident that might relate to global warming as a separate incident is one of the things that is liable to get us to something very like the Pox.

Schweitzer: You could buy beachfront property 500 miles inland from New Orleans...

Butler: I've just moved from southern California to Seattle. In 1999, I did that. I think I believe a little bit of what I've been saying.

Schweitzer: Do you think that writing novels about this has much impact?

Butler: Not now, no. Not enough people are suffering. I do think novels and movies and TV shows had an impact on whether or not we had that thermonuclear war. I think novels and films matter when people begin to get frightened, because then novels help them to imagine possibilities, that maybe they don't want to imagine, but they need to.

Schweitzer: There's a great Ray Bradbury line, that the purpose of science fiction is not to predict the future, but to prevent it.

Butler: Perhaps to give warning. There's an old idea that science fiction has the three categories, the "What If," "If Only," and "If This Goes On." The *Parable* books are definitely an "If This Goes On" story.

Schweitzer: If we are to be a little more pessimistic, I would think that a religion that would come out of a crisis like the Burn would be a really militant, nasty one.

Butler: It could be. In fact, a nasty one does come out. But there's also my characters' religion. I grew up, had my adolescence during the space-race. I

used to get up at three or four in the morning and watch the space-shots go. It seemed to me that that was our way of having that nuclear war without having it. We were able to get the technological boost. We were able to compete with our enemies, and we were able not to kill a good portion of the human species in the process. I thought about that, when I created Earthseed, the religion of my character. I thought, what might she propose as a goal that might be worth going after, but that wouldn't involve wiping out a good portion of humanity? What I thought of was the idea of going to the stars. It is such a huge, difficult, long-term family of projects that it just might hold our attention, give us the boost we need, especially when it comes as a religious mandate. It could also cause a lot of trouble. It probably would, considering that we human beings are good at finding things to fight about, making trouble where it isn't necessary. But I had my character persist and manage to at least get people started.

Schweitzer: Are you optimistic or pessimistic toward the future? Utopia, disaster, or do we just somehow muddle through?

Butler: I don't know. The problem is that we're really good at responding to crises, but we're really bad at long-term planning, especially when it requires that we stop doing something that we really enjoy doing, like burning fossil fuels. Probably we will muddle through for a while, but sooner or later we'll push the environment too far. We'll do something that we won't be able to recover from.

Schweitzer: Indeed, if we ever did have that thermonuclear war, it might not be possible to build civilization again, because, among other things, all the easily obtainable fuel and metals have already been mined out and you have to have high technology to extract what's left.

Butler: Or we might have to do something else. Our inventiveness is not something that I have a problem with. It is our tendency not to plan far enough ahead. We might see the cliff. I don't drive. I am one of the few people I know who lived in Los Angeles for most of my life who doesn't drive. The reason I don't drive is that I'm a bit dyslexic. I have fairly quick reactions, but they're strange. When I was learning to drive, my teacher had me on a little mountain road, a two-lane road where you really had to squeeze past another car, and I was headed out on this little windy road, and I realized that I had to turn. Left and right mean nothing to me. You can say, "Go left," and if my life depends on it, I'm liable to go right. So the teacher wanted me

to go a certain way, and it was obvious that I should because the other way was off a cliff. Well, I didn't process what he said and I went the wrong way. If there had not been dual controls on the car, I wouldn't be here.

I think, sometimes, there is a problem like that with the human species. We might see the right way, but we don't do it, not because we're dyslexic, but because we just find it more comfortable or more financially rewarding to go the wrong way, at least as long as we can.

Question from the audience: Are you going to write more of the *Parable* books?

Butler: Not with the same main character, because she's dead. I had the idea of following two or four groups who leave. There's a verse in the character's religion that says, "God is teacher, trickster, chaos, clay." I was going to do *The Parable of the Trickster*, *The Parable of the Teacher*, *The Parable of Chaos*, and *The Parable of Clay*. It didn't work out. I still might do them, but I'm not doing them now.

As a matter of fact the fiction I am working on now, or that I was working on before I went to the non-fiction book, is an odd fantasy that I suddenly came up with because I used to know a very interesting lady that I've never been able to use in a story before. She's found her way into this one.

Schweitzer: It sounds like you've been hit by lightning several times during your career, and have spent the rest of your life writing that out.

Butler: Everybody is.

Schweitzer: Everybody is, but most people don't recognize it and do anything with it.

Butler: It's more lighting, really. I wait until there's something that won't let me alone. I don't always wait. Sometimes I dive right in too quickly. But, best case, I wait until something won't let me alone, either because I agree, or I disagree with it, or because it fascinates me.

Schweitzer: What I mean by being hit by lightning is a case like Bram Stoker. He spent most of his life as a theatrical manager, but he still cranked out a number of routine books. He got hit by lightning once, and wrote *Dracula*, and nothing else he did mattered.

Butler: I am a little bothered by your putting it that way. I understand what you mean. It's one of the things that I try to keep young writers from thinking, that you have to wait, that it's all luck, lightning will strike and then you'll have a wonderful bestseller. So I think it's like the old idea that fortune

favours the prepared mind. If you've developed the habit of paying attention to the things that happen around you and to you, then, yeah, you'll get hit by lightning.

Schweitzer: I think that you should tell the young writers to write up every story they feel like writing, because you only know in retrospect and possibly years later, if you were ever hit by lightning.

Butler: I don't think so. You'd waste an awful lot of time writing crap.

Schweitzer: True, but to use the example of Stoker, did he know that *Dracula* was head and shoulders above everything else he ever wrote, when he wrote it, or did he only discover this long afterwards?

Butler: On the other hand, did he write every thought he had?

Schweitzer: He probably didn't have time to. He had a very busy life.

Question from audience: Classical music is classic music because it has survived beyond its marketing age. The stuff that you don't hear any more, maybe you don't hear because it wasn't so good...

Butler: Maybe it just didn't have the necessary PR.

Fan: Maybe the rest of Bram Stoker's books weren't very good.

Butler: But I don't think this is something you should worry about. I remember being on a panel at a science-fiction convention years ago, and one of the questions put to us was, "How do you want to be remembered?" And I said, "Forget remembered. I just want to be read now." Everybody else had been talking about how they wanted to be remembered and which books they wanted to be remembered for. We don't have any control over that. It's not something that I worry about. I guess that's what I mean, too. You really *can't* decide, "well, I'm going to write everything because something might be a wonderful hit." It's not something you can control.

Question from the audience (about what Octavia wrote in youth).

Butler: What I wrote when I was ten should have been put in the garbage. But, to tell the truth, I still have it all. The good thing is that it was written in #2 pencil on both sides of the page, so it's illegible now. It rubbed off on itself. But I didn't know how to write a novel when I was twelve years old, when I got the idea for *Patternmaster*. I didn't know how to write a novel when I was 20. I didn't learn how to write a novel until I hit bottom, in a work-related way. I was, as I said, tak-

ing a lot of horrible jobs, and I took a job as a tele-marketer. At that time it was called "telephone solicitation." I have a good phone voice. I am told I have a good phone presence, and I actually sold things to people. I'm very ashamed. But mostly I would call them, bother them, and they'd cuss me out. I'd call someone else... This is why I don't cuss telephone marketers. I just quietly hang up on them.

I got laid off that job about two weeks before Christmas, back in the '70s. Any job that you get laid off two weeks before Christmas, this is a kind of disaster. I knew it wasn't going to be a very good Christmas. I actually cried about losing that job. If I was crying about losing a job that awful, it was definitely time to fish or cut bait. It was time for me either to write the novels, or get that civil service job that my mother had been urging on me, the one with the pension.

Still, though, I didn't know how to write a novel. No idea. So I thought about what I had written. I realized that I did know how to write a short story. My short stories averaged about 20 pages long. I thought that 20 pages might be fairly decent for a novel chapter, and the way I wrote my first novels was in 20-page increments. I was very lucky that my first novel, *Patternmaster*, was a kind of chase story, because chase stories have built-in endings. I didn't know at the time that I needed an end, before I began. If I didn't have an end, I wouldn't get anywhere. I'd just wander. I had been wandering, but when this version of *Patternmaster* became a chase story, this plan worked. I think of it as a method of novel writing, 20 pages at a time. That's how I managed to get my first stuff done. I did *Patternmaster*, mailed it out, did *Mind of My Mind*, mailed it out, got busy on the version of *Survivor* that was eventually published, and was about halfway through it before I had to go back to work.

Question from audience: How did you find research materials for *Wild Seed*?

Butler: I was very lucky. I had the Los Angeles Public Library, the main branch nearby. In some cases it would have one copy of something that looked like it had been mimeographed. I wasn't allowed to take it out of the room. So I had to use their copier, 15 cents a page, and pretty much photocopy the thing. There were others that I was allowed to check out, special-loan. I was able to do all the research I had to do at the library, mainly because I had no money. I couldn't afford to go to Nigeria. I couldn't even afford to go to upstate New York.

I had just finished *Kindred*, and I was in a kind of depression. It was hard to write and not pleasant to

research – that was the *real* research job, by the way – and *Kindred* wasn't selling. And I just drowned my sorrows in writing *Wild Seed*. It was *fun*, to my surprise. Shortly after that, somebody torched the Los Angeles Public Library and a lot of the stuff that I only got to see disappeared forever. So I was lucky, in that case. I had a lot of good stuff available. Why anybody would torch a library, I still don't know.

Hal Clement (from audience): People have been burning individual books for a long time.

Butler: I don't think they ever found out who did it. I blame the city council, myself. They knew that it was a firetrap, and for years they had done nothing. Remodelling was supposed to be finally about to start after years of, "Well, we can save money by not doing this, so let's not do it. We'll proclaim ourselves wonderful savers of the taxpayers' money. And then when it finally gets burned, oh well..."

The way it burned, I'm not sure what to make of that. The fire began in religion and burned directly up to science, then over to social science, where there was a lot more water damage than fire damage. Somebody maybe thought this one out.

Schweitzer: This is what they mean by "intelligent design."

Butler: I hope not.

Question from audience: How do you go about plotting a novel which is essentially character-driven, as opposed to action-driven?

Butler: There's plenty of action in *Wild Seed*, but I know what you mean. I had to, because I wrote the end before the beginning. I wrote *Mind of My Mind*, and it was published, and writing *Wild Seed* was writing a prequel to *Mind of My Mind*. There was a real limit to what I could do. That was another kind of puzzle. I discovered, to my amazement, that I liked puzzles. I never thought I did, when I was in school. But I guess I like the puzzles that I choose or create. Okay, I have these two people and I know how they turn out. So, what can I do with them? That's what I had to figure out. It was writing in a box, and I really enjoyed solving the problem. How I did it? It's been a long time, but I find that I don't like to outline. Outlining to me kills the immediacy of the story. I guess what I mean by that is the more detailed outline. I have to know where I'm headed. I had to have that before I began the story. I had to tell myself the story in a sentence, although the sentence that describes that novel is not a good one. This just meant, "How do I get from here to there?" and what kind of divisions, time-periods, where

do I want to head, and how far do I want to go with it. Sometimes history provides you with a kind of outline.

Question from audience: One thing I've always liked about the *Patternist* universe series, is that it is so obviously a complete universe, planned out.

Butler: I never really planned *Clay's Ark* when I began those books, but when I'd written *Patternmaster* and *Mind of My Mind*, I realized that I did want to know more about the Clay Arks, and I began asking myself questions. That's when I came up with the book *Clay's Ark*. I used to live in the desert of southern California, so I have been wanting to set a book out there for a long time. I think I got the idea for how to do it when I was on my way home from that Worldcon I mentioned. I had been in Phoenix, and I was taking a Greyhound bus home. I used to ride Greyhound buses all over the country. Ever so much fun.

And there was a storm. First it was a sand and dust storm, where you could barely see anything. Then it rained, and it was a mud storm, where you absolutely couldn't see anything. Sensible people were pulled over to the side of the road because they couldn't see. But Greyhound bus drivers have schedules. The bus kept on going. All I could think was, the driver didn't look suicidal, so probably he wanted to live. He must have been able to see something. I finally figured out that he could see the yellow line, which didn't really seem to be enough, but that storm is the beginning of *Clay's Ark* as well as an interesting facet of my life.

Schweitzer: Do you avoid outlining in detail because the books are a process of discovery, that you only discover what's in them by writing them?

Butler: Yeah. I do need to know, as I said, the end. Maybe it's a process of discovering how to get there.

Schweitzer: Do you ever get to the end and discover it wasn't the end you thought?

Butler: No, but I had a case where I discovered in the middle that I wasn't going to the end I thought I was. That was *Adulthood Rites*, which is the middle book of a trilogy. I thought it was going to be a downbeat book with a really bad, cliffhanger ending – bad in the sense that my characters would be in big trouble. But it came to a completely different sort of ending because my character insisted on finding a way to save some of what was left of humankind. Once I realized that was where he was headed, I just let him go and watched the story happen. It was fun to write.

Schweitzer: Thanks, Octavia.

Just a Number

Martha A. Hood

“Oh,” Ursula Blue said, “you don’t want to do *that*.”
“Oh, but I *do*.” Jed Munsen, even more than most of Ursula’s clients, carried an attitude of entitlement in his simple, square bearing.

Ursula asked, “But why the *rush*? You’re in the prime of your life!”

“Oh, come on. I’m being exploited like everyone else my age and you know it.”

She sat back in her chair and regarded him. He was 86 standard, but had been Fifties for 18 years. As a long-time Thirties herself, she didn’t get it – why on earth would a person be anxious to get older? No, she didn’t get it at all, but her training as an Age Promotion Concierge stepped in where understanding failed. No matter the client or the nature of his request, her training suggested she begin with a standard, off-the-rack flirtatiousness, move on to a heart-felt display of sympathy with the customer’s complaint, and finish with convincing and persuasive arguments to help the customer understand his true goals, which were, by definition, the same as those of Cityburb itself.

Flattery fit in there, too. “We owe *such* a debt to you and your work over the years. I see you have one-and-a-half jobs?”

“Yes, and it’s too much. I want to cut back.”

“I see you were a pioneer in the old-style brain storage technology, and that one of your jobs is to retrofit old downloaded entities. That must be so satisfying!”

“After so many years, it’s less than exciting, actually.”

“And you’re also a liaison to our mid-western agribusiness interests.”

“Yes. Biochem division.”

“Do you earn enough to cover your needs?”

He shrugged. “We earn enough to live here.”

“And your wife?”

“She’s a part-time wedding planner and full-time travel agent.”

“I see you once lived in the Burb.”

“Yes. We lived there when our daughter was young. We had a kitchen, even a small back yard.”

“I don’t detect much enthusiasm for your current jobs. If one or both are going stale on you, we might be able to make some adjustments in them, as well as fine-tune your lifestyle.”

He waved away her suggestion. “All jobs are pretty much alike.”

“Oh, that’s not true at *all*. You can go back for retraining, learn something completely different. Lots of people do. You have so much solid life experience, I’ll bet you’d be just *super* at anything you tried!”

“I don’t want to learn anything new. Look, I’ve been Fifties for nearly two full decades. I’m ready to move on, cut back to one job. Preferably part-time.”

Ursula gave him her most sympathetic smile. “I’m so sorry you’re unhappy with your current situation.”

“Sorry doesn’t help me. I need you to approve me to move on. In fact, I wouldn’t mind skipping Sixties alto-

gether and going straight to Junior Geezer. I want to be a great old guy like Orlando Penza."

Oh, dear. This was worse than Ursula had imagined. "But, he's the oldest man alive!"

"A Super-Geezer for all time."

"That may be his classification, but he works more like a Fifties. He still earns a considerable residual income from his product lines. For that matter, he still earns money for public appearances and for his feats of strength." She reached across her desk. She was going to pat his hand, but he moved it away. "That's why you admire him so much, don't you see? Because he can still *do* it. He can still produce, just like *you*." She paused, then glanced at her desk to double-check his first name. "We need you, Jed. Cityburb depends on you – your vitality, your youth, your brains, and your experience. We need all the things you promised us when you signed on to live here. I don't see *how* we can carry on without you at full capacity."

"I'm flattered."

"It's nothing but the truth." She touched a key on her desktop. "Shall I say then, that you have chosen to stay Fifties?"

"No! You're not listening! I don't want to be Fifties!"

Oops. She had rushed it a bit. Oh well, sometimes she had to be the baddie, never mind what the Customer Service guidelines said. "From what I can see, Jed, your dissatisfaction is due to something other than your age. It could be your job, or maybe your marriage. I suggest you work on those areas. It would be irresponsible for me to promote you for the wrong reasons. Your request for a waiver is denied."

Munsen buried his face in his hands. When he lifted his head, he asked, "So how long are you going to stall me?"

"I don't understand."

"Are you going to keep me Fifties until anti-aging stops working and my body gives out?"

"We have no reason to think that will happen, at least not any time soon. I mean, look at Orlando Penza!"

"But you don't *know*. No one really knows."

"But we *do* know you've got *oodles* of time left." She reached across her desk and touched his elbow. "Please don't be like this. Remember, age is just a number!"

As Munsen walked away from the Age Assignment Agency offices, he brushed past others much like himself, men and women of indeterminate true age, playing out their current roles as Twenties, through Sixties, and on to the two levels of Geezer. To look at them, he couldn't tell how happy any of them were with their official age brackets. They all functioned. What choice did they have?

"Excuse me, sir!"

Munsen was about to step off the curb. He turned to see a downloaded entity, a little, self-propelled, rolling pyramid, up against the wall of the building.

"I seem to have had an accident. Can you help me?"

Munsen glanced around, hoping to see someone else better equipped than he to help the entity, but the crowd he was in a few moments before had moved on.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"I think my wheel is stuck. If you could call the author-

ities for me, that's all I need."

"Why can't you call them yourself?" But as soon as the words were out of his mouth, Munsen saw why. The entity's injuries weren't the result of accident. "What happened to you?"

"Some Teens roughed me up. Smashed some of my parts."

Looking at the broken antenna, the shattered light sensors, and the flattened wheel so ruthlessly wedged into the ventilation grate, Munsen could only shake his head.

"Fortunately," the box said, "I can still talk and I can still hear. That was how I knew you were walking by, because of your footsteps."

Munsen called the authorities. "I'll wait with you until they get here."

"Thanks."

"Too many Teens about," Munsen continued. "They're nothing but trouble."

"They get bored," the entity said. "They want to be Twenties. Can't say I blame them."

Munsen thought the entity had a point. "I was lucky. I was 27 when Legal Age Promotion started. I never had to be a Teen. It's bad enough being a regular teenager."

"Same way when I was young. We thought we were immortal. We drank, drove automobiles, did drugs, and listened to loud music. Now the kids *are* immortal, and they're having a hell of a time!"

Munsen chuckled. "I heard the latest thing in substance abuse is an inhalant that counteracts the nicotine vaccine. Tobacco's no fun for them otherwise."

"Doesn't surprise me," the entity said. "There's no point to tobacco without the addiction. No point to alcohol without getting drunk. These kids don't have anything – they don't even have any decent music. What's left but sex and vandalism?" He asked then, "You say you were 27 when this all started? So what are you now? Fifties?"

"Yeah. But I ought to be Sixties."

The downloaded entity laughed. "I'm luckier than you," he said. "I was able to retire for a while, before I had to be downloaded. A young guy like you, they're going to keep you working until you have a stroke or something. You'll be lucky if there's anything left of you to download. And if you have any special, historical skills, you're even worse off."

Munsen thought of his retro brain storage work and closed his eyes.

"Are you still there?" the entity asked.

"I'm here."

"What's going on? Have people gathered to gawk?"

"No, no one's here. Just you and me."

"You're sure?"

"Just us and the AdVid board over our heads."

"Who's on it this week?"

"Orlando Penza. It's a sports drink ad commemorating his 145th birthday."

The entity asked, "How do you think he's looking these days?"

"Not a day older than when he started anti-aging."

"Aw, he always looked young," the entity said, "and was always athletic. He made the rest of us look bad."

"Do you know him?"

"We went to school together. We're the same age. We started anti-aging the same year, when we were both 71, but I had a pre-existing cancer. Once they anti-aged me, it started growing like crazy. Turned out my meat was past its expiration date. They had no choice but to download me. I was one of the first at that, too."

"I'm sorry," Munsen said.

"Oh, I don't mind. It's been so long now, I don't remember anything different. I was kind of a geek, anyway. You know, not a real physical type."

"What do you think I should do?" Munsen asked. "I want to be Sixties, and the Agency won't promote me."

"Ever thought of going freelance?"

"You mean, dressing and living like a Sixties, and never mind my official designation? Sure. I've had friends cross-dress, but just for an evening or a weekend. I've never seen the point. This isn't a whim or a diversion for me."

"Well, there might be some point to it. Maybe it's something you should consider. What do you have to lose?"

"I'm not sure."

At that moment, an emergency rescue cart wheeled around the corner.

"Oh good, they're here!" the entity said, and thanked Munsen for his trouble.

A few moments after the damaged box had been stowed in the back and driven away, Munsen realized he hadn't even asked his name. He had enjoyed talking to the entity, but the encounter left him emotionally drained. This little box was cheery and pleasant. Many weren't. Munsen never knew whether to feel sorry for the downloaded or what. Every time he met one, he felt uncomfortable about the work he had done for the last several decades.

He was the best at what he did; he knew that, but he always had the feeling that some essence was lost with each update. Some data was lost; other data was corrupted. He had been assured that his process was far less error-prone than the natural progress of the biological brain, with all its forgetfulness and confabulation. He didn't believe it, though.

Thinking about these things depressed him enough that he decided not to go back to work in the afternoon. It was only his second job anyway, the part-time one. He turned instead toward his and Gloria's apartment, hoping she would be at home.

Two women walked by. They were Sixties. Munsen thought how fine they looked. He loved women in their Sixties. He thought Gloria was beautiful, but she had an edge in her Fifties she hadn't had in her Forties, and he hoped she would soften once again with maturity.

It really was a lot about attitude. Age really was just a number. What if he did stop acting like a Fifties, and started acting like a Sixties? What would they do to him?

Very little probably, other than to appeal to his civic duty, and to remind him that when he accepted citizenship in Cityburb he agreed to live within the structure of Legal Age Promotion, as it was implemented under the Special Demographics Act of 2035. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, with the demise of Social Security and the breakdown of the Federal Government. Even during the

uncertain period of the establishment of Cityburb and the New Regional Confederate States, he had been happy with his role in the scheme of things. He felt grateful not to have experienced the civil disturbances and social unrest that other regions did. He had felt content for a long time, but now he felt used. Legal Age Promotion (in this case, lack of it) was an unfair tax of his very flesh.

He didn't think he could take it any more and he was looking for a way out. The trick would be getting Gloria to go along. He feared she would respond negatively. She enjoyed the busyness and the sense of responsibility a Fifties had. Susan, their daughter, was still officially Twenties, and Gloria enjoyed fussing over her jobs, her romances, and her emotional crises. Munsen loved his daughter, but he wanted to get away sometimes; he wanted Gloria to join him in the more relaxed Sixties.

Gloria pulled two JustHeats from a narrow cupboard and popped them into the microwave. "You're nuts," she said.

"I need to move on," Munsen said. "I've earned it. I want to travel, I want to go to Europe, and I want you with me."

She laughed almost silently, shoulders shaking. She wanted to scream.

"What's so funny? You're a travel agent. We'd get discounts."

She stopped laughing. "You're really serious."

"Sure. Why not?"

"Jed, you know it's all bogus. Travel is just a method of separating people from their money. It's fake."

"How can it be fake? It's not virtual."

"I didn't say it was virtual; I said it was fake. You aren't allowed to go anywhere on your own without a visa. You have to be on a tour. It's all organized."

"Well, that's all right. They take you to all the big attractions."

She shook her head. "Yes. They race through the cultural sights, but you'll spend 80 percent of your time in gift shops."

He frowned. "Orlando Penza still travels on his own, here and in Europe, just like he's done all his life."

"He's a celebrity. You're not." She oven-mitted their now bubbling JustHeats from the microwave and brought them to the table. Once deposited in the middle of each of the two place mats, the lids peeled back and released the steam. She sat next to him at their kitchenette counter.

He said, "I don't see what difference that makes."

She took an irritated bite and stared at him as she chewed and swallowed. "He travels with his own entourage of security personnel, publicity people, and tour guides. It's like a private tour. Look, anywhere you go, here or Europe, half the people out there want to kill you and the other half want to take your money. The point of the tours is to separate the tourists from their money, and to keep the terrorists separated from the tourists."

"You're so cynical."

She shoved her plate away, although she had taken only a few bites. "You forget how lucky we are. We live on one-and-a-half jobs, while most people have two or more. Then there are all the masses across the country,

living in poorly regulated regions where there are no guarantees at all. They're the ones you buy trinkets from when you travel." She shook her head. "Appreciate what you have, because your life is better than that of 90 percent of the world."

"But where's the adventure?"

"If you want adventure, have an affair. They haven't started regulating that yet."

After a few minutes, he stood and disposed of the plates. She knew her words both puzzled and disturbed him. Well, too bad; she spoke only the truth.

A few marriages lasted a lifetime, but most didn't. Life lasted too long and one marriage wasn't enough to fill it. This was Munsen's third, and Gloria's fourth. They had been married 40 years, and right now, it seemed like three lifetimes.

Munsen went from the kitchenette to their small front room. He sat down and turned on a comedy, but Gloria doubted he was paying attention. She was sure he was still stewing about his age.

She could tell he was going to try to live as a Sixties. But how, other than the clothes? The additives that kept him Fifties came in every bite of JustHeats he ate, and in his wine and fruit drinks. His clothing protected him from diseases and cancers of the skin. The apartment air they breathed rejuvenated their lungs. She wondered how easy it would be to counteract the carefully balanced cocktail of nutrients and chemicals that had slowed aging to a barely perceptible crawl. Probably not that difficult for her husband. He even knew how to cook. When their daughter, Susan, was young, they had that full-kitchened townhouse in the Burb. Jed had tried hobby cooking, and it was fun for a while, even though they had to take some of their supplements in pill form. Once Susan was out of school, they'd moved to the city, gotten busy at work, and that was that for cooking.

Their mini-kitchen had a microwave, one hot plate, a sink, and a refrigerator. She didn't see him doing much cooking here, but she was still willing to bet he'd come up with something.

He looked away from the comedy on the wall, and as though he had been reading her mind, he said, "I have already lived longer than any of my ancestors, but I have no more control over my body or my process of aging than my great-grandfather did."

"But you aren't going to age like he did," she said, "and you aren't going to die of prostate cancer, or any of those other ghastly diseases they used to die of. You and I will live far longer than any generation before us."

"Yeah. And I do want to live forever," Munsen said. "I just don't want to stand still while I'm doing it."

"I don't follow you."

"Just what I said."

"How can you talk about standing still when we've never been busier?"

Munsen said, "Ever see a hamster on a wheel? He's pretty busy, too."

"How can you say that? We have everything."

"Everything but what I want."

Gloria felt tears well up in her eyes. Her husband had

the look of a man determined to throw his life away, and, by extension, hers, too.

And she knew she couldn't allow that to happen.

One night, one month later, Ursula Blue was about to leave work when her wall flashed: *My office, please.*

With a sigh, she headed toward the large cubicle in the corner.

The Office Director, Jason Ponge, a trim, fit Forties, sat behind his desk. He indicated a folding chair. "Sit down." He paused as she did so, then continued. "We have a new guy living outside his bracket. He's one of yours. His wife called me a week ago and turned him in. We've confirmed her facts."

"His wife?" It had to be that stupid Munsen guy. "But what's it to us?" she asked. "It's not illegal if all he's doing is cross-dressing."

"Not exactly illegal," Jason said, "but not something we can tolerate for very much longer. This bottleneck between the older categories is going to blow up on us, and I need to know why you couldn't bring him around."

Ursula frowned. "I tried. I explained we stopped all promotions a year ago. I told him he was far too young and vital to be Sixties. He has some specialized skills, too."

"Whatever you said wasn't enough, apparently. He's ignoring you. And it gets worse."

"What, is he messing with his biochem?" Ursula asked.

"Yes, according to his wife," Jason said, "but even that's not my main concern." He touched his desktop, and the screen behind him lit up. "Have you seen this?"

The screen behind him showed five individuals, three male, two female. At first glance, they looked like Junior Geezers – the clothes, the hair, the lines on their faces – but something was not right, something about their posture, maybe. Then she saw it. "They're young!"

"They're Teens."

"Oh no, they're dressed like Munsen! Even the girls!"

"He's developed quite a following," Jason said.

"But how? I've never met anyone so ordinary!"

"Who can explain why kids notice anything? All I know is, from a Customer Service standpoint, this is very difficult to handle. Munsen's subverting the system, and the Teens are embracing him as a role model and an icon."

She shook her head. "Kids."

"And then we come back to his biochem use."

"Well, at least the kids don't have access to that!"

Jason raised an eyebrow.

"Well, if they get a hold of Munsen's stuff, can't you just arrest them? And Munsen, too."

Jason shook his head. "Possession for the purpose of biochemical alteration is illegal. Substance addiction is illegal. But suicide is not."

Ursula had forgotten. It was a small but necessary crack in the law to allow voluntary downloading. "So you figure Munsen's slowly committing suicide."

Jason shrugged. "He could claim so. The law's murky."

"So, if we tried to enforce his citizenship contract, he might sue us and win."

"Oh, I doubt he'd win, but he could gain a sympathy following. You know, 'pursuit of happiness' and all that.

How Cityburb was the birthplace of personal freedom in the old United States, whose values we uphold, blah, blah, blah. It wouldn't be just Teens following his lead."

"Win the battle, lose the war," Ursula said.

Jason nodded. "Legal victory turns into customer relations disaster."

Ursula threw her hands in the air. "Why does everyone want to be old all of a sudden? What happened to wanting to stay young?"

"Look at it from Munsen's point of view. He doesn't care about youth from the standpoint of style; he only wants to retire. And he can do that while keeping all his faculties – his eyesight and hearing, his mobility and mental capacity. And he needn't look bad. Are you old enough to remember what old age used to look like? Well now, we can treat unsightly age spots, bulging veins, and saggy upper arms. Our Geezers have full heads of shimmering white hair and a few attractive character lines on their beautiful, smiling faces. Why wouldn't he want to get old?"

Ursula asked, "So, what do we do about him?"

"We're going to give him his wish. We'll make him an official Sixties." Before she could protest, he added, "And we'll make some room at the far end."

"The Depositorium?" Ursula whispered.

"Entirely voluntary, of course," Jason said quickly.

Ursula was taken aback. The Depositorium offered an option for individuals with rare, debilitating, and incurable conditions whose brains were fully functional, as well as that small percentage of the population for whom anti-aging didn't work. As an autonomous, self-propelled, pyramidal unit, the patient could see and hear, but could not taste or smell. The tactile sense was, at best, rudimentary. Being downloaded gave an existence of sorts, but one that many found unsatisfactory. For that reason, many people put it off until it was too late.

"Cityburb will pick up the expense, and offer a small bonus as well," Jason added. "It's cost-effective."

Ursula asked, "How overt are we going to be about our, um, recruitment?" As a Cityburb employee, she knew that occasional verifiable candour improved customer relations, while the rest of the time, the mere appearance of candour was the safer option.

"We will go public," Jason said. "We will air ads for volunteers, and, to cover us with Munsen, I want you to organize a lottery for all those who've applied to graduate into the Sixties or Geezer categories."

"But Munsen will win?"

"Munsen will win."

Ursula nodded. She understood how it would all work.

Ten days later, the results were announced. Munsen stared at the message on his and Gloria's west wall for a full minute. He called out to Gloria, "I won! I actually won!"

He heard the shower going, so he assumed she didn't hear him. He went to the bedroom. When he slid open the door, he saw she wasn't in the shower. She was lying on her side on the bed, back to him, talking quietly into the phone. She was naked. She hadn't heard him come in. She laughed softly into the phone. Quietly he shut the door. An hour later, on the same west wall, he heard the

devastating news. As he watched the press conference, he scratched absently at the knee of his high-waisted, pleated, Geezer denims. By this time, Gloria was out of the shower and dressed. She leaned against the kitchenette counter in her usual pose, one pleather-booted ankle crossed over the other. She sniffed. She smirked.

Munsen steeled himself against her attitude and kept his attention on the wall. His joy at winning the lottery dissipated as he realized the cost. It was tit for tat, quid pro quo. So that he, little worm that he was, could graduate to Sixties, the great Orlando was stepping up to his destiny.

Orlando Penza was the oldest man in the world. The Super Geezer of all Geezers, he had been alive since the Truman administration, in the old U.S.A.

He was famous not only for his age, but for his level of fitness. In his standard eighties, after being on anti-aging cocktails for 15 years, he swam the English Channel and then bicycled from Calais to Sicily. In his many self-help books and seminars, he attributed his vitality to a moderate regimen of diet, vitamin and mineral supplements, exercise, exuberant but socially responsible sex, and a wealth of intellectual and social activities. Without anti-aging, however, he'd be dead now and everyone knew it.

Nonetheless, he had made a good living from enjoying a long, happy, and healthy life. Penza preached that everyone could do what he had done, and enough believed him to make him a cultural icon.

It had been a good life.

At this moment, he climbed the neo-classical steps of the Depositorium at a run. Camerabots buzzed around him, catching his ascent from every possible angle. He was still so strong; his muscles hummed, his joints bent and rolled without a crackle or a pop, and his heart pumped at a spirited but relaxed pace.

Most people couldn't understand why he was doing this, but some could.

He felt like a traveller in time. Of those fleshly beings left alive who could also remember the Kennedy assassinations, Orlando was the only one whose mind was thoroughly sound. And even he had been losing track of things lately. Downloading now would preserve what was left and prevent further deterioration.

Would his consciousness continue, as he rolled around in his little black pyramid? He wasn't at all sure he believed that. Nor was he at all sure he wanted it to be so. For all his vigour, emotionally, he was tired.

As he walked across the threshold, he felt light and young, and there was a bounce in his step. There were too damn many people in the world anyway. Pretty soon there would be too many downloaded entities. But, hell, life wanted to keep on living, didn't it? You couldn't blame a person for that.

Ursula found Munsen difficult to look at. She said, "Your attempts at aging have been a resounding success, I would say."

"I'm doing my best."

"I don't know whether to ask 'how,' or 'why' first."

Munsen grinned. Ursula winced. Those dozens of sun

damage spots on his face – one would think smiling was painful.

"As to how," Munsen said, "Anti-aging is a cocktail of everything – vitamins, minerals, trace elements, enzymes, hormones, and a few special chemical additives in perfect balance with each other. It's not that difficult to disrupt a perfect balance. As to why, you're too young to understand."

"Look, I know I'm Thirties, but my solar age is close to yours – only a few years difference."

He shook his head. "Doesn't count. If you can't even face being Forties, what can you possibly understand about wanting to mature?"

"You can be mature without being old."

"To a point, perhaps."

His stillness, his poise, made Ursula take notice. She leaned forward. "Tell me what it is you have now that you didn't have before. And tell me, without lying, that you don't miss what you've lost."

"It's not that you gain anything; it's that you lose the inessentials."

"Like Gloria?"

He shrugged.

Ursula felt bad. "I'm sorry. That was mean."

"It's okay. What Gloria really wanted was to slip back into Forties. Your boss makes her feel young. She's a Fifties breathing Forties air."

This surprised Ursula. "She and Jason have actually moved in together?"

"I understand that's the plan, although she's still at our apartment part-time."

"Which I see you need to be out of by the end of the week." She looked at the slouched figure before her. "Have you spoken to your daughter?"

"She's offered to let me move in, but I told her no. She's Twenties; she's got her own life." He laughed. "She didn't argue."

"So where are you going to go?"

"I haven't decided."

"You know that the terms of your contract with us permit us – compel us – to deport you."

"Of course. That's why I'm here. I assumed this was my exit interview."

"You were planning to leave Cityburb with no destination in mind?"

He shrugged. "What choice do I have?"

"I can give you choices. We need you, Jed. We needed you two months ago, and we need you now. How'd you like to help us fight Teen crime?"

"Huh?" There. She'd surprised him.

"Young people look up to you. I see you aided a downloaded entity a few months ago, after a Teen attack. We could put you in a PR or personal appearance role, and I *know* you'd be *super*."

"So I'm rewarded for breaking my contract, because it would be poor customer relations to hold me to it?"

His perfect poise, so unlike last time, unsettled her. He made her feel terribly young. "It would not be in Cityburb's interest to deport you. On the contrary, we'd like you to stay. We can repair some of the damage you've done to yourself if you like, or you can stay as you are, or you can even be downloaded. You could hang out with Orlando Penza! Hey, you could travel with him, be part of his entourage! Part-time, of course. Gloria told Jason you were interested in independent travel."

Suddenly, his poise wavered. "No, no, no. The travel was just a... thing, an example, something... I don't know." He stared at the floor. "I've lost nearly everything – my youth, my wife, and my idol. My ideals are all I have left." He looked up at her. "No thanks. Keep your jobs. And don't fret. I'll be out of town by Friday."

Ursula found herself inappropriately emotional over this ridiculous client of hers. "For heaven's sake, *how* can you not *care* about yourself?"

Munsen leaned forward and patted her hand. "Don't worry yourself over a boring old fart like me, dear."

She opened her mouth to tell him he wasn't boring, then closed it. Because, after all, old people were sort of boring, and there really was no way around it.

Martha A. Hood's previous stories in *Interzone* were "Learning the Language" (issue 42), "Dust to Dust to..." (issue 52) and "The Scratchings on the Wall" (issue 179). She lives in Irvine, California, and her stories have also appeared in *Pulphouse*, *Tales of the Unanticipated* and other small-press magazines. Her collection *Inside a Bear and Other Dark Places*, containing 20 varied tales, appeared from Stone Dragon Press in 1999.



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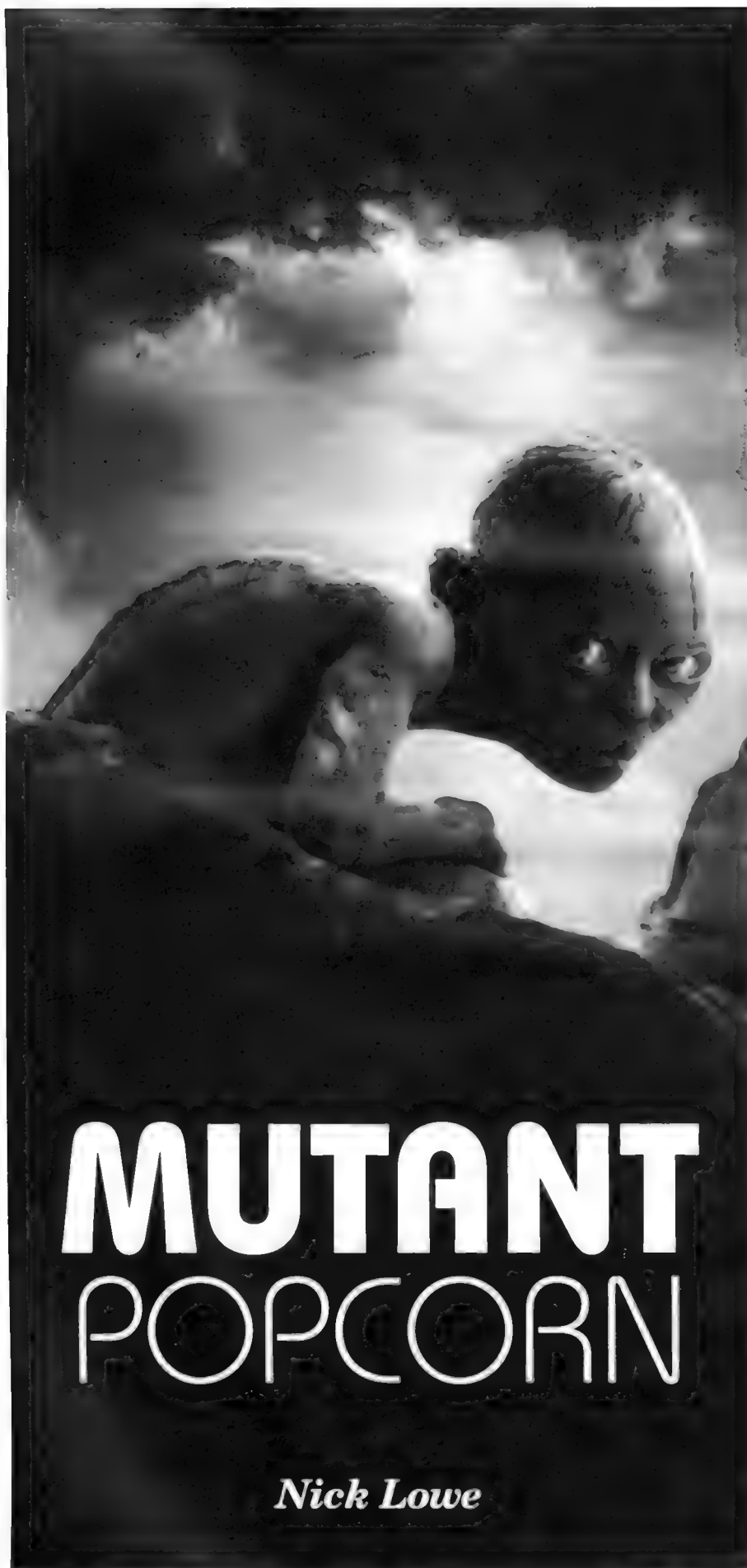
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So the war of the *Rings* has seen its first major battle, in the death struggle of Peter Jackson vs New Line to try and assemble an edit of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* that made sense. Very little authoritative detail has leaked out past the PR machine as of writing, but it's fairly clear that the strange, misshapen version that escaped into cinemas before Christmas was an unhappy compromise assembled out of reshoots and post-production, in which structure and plot had changed substantially from the script shot in 2000, and that there were quite serious clashes over running time and basic intelligibility that simmered well into the autumn. Normally one's sympathies sit instinctively with the film-makers in such tussles. But it's hard not to feel that Jackson and his co-writers dug their own hole on this one by radically dismantling the novel and then discovering they couldn't put it back together. *Towers* is considerably less forgiving material than *Fellowship*, whose unilinear storyline, first-half longueurs, and preponderance of exposition over event made for relatively easy reshaping. The second volume's timeline and plotting are far tighter, spanning only 17 days of Frodo's journey after the ten-and-a-half months covered in *Fellowship*, and the chronology in particular gave its author a lot of trouble, for reasons you don't fully appreciate till you see someone else try to make it work.

The problem is quite a fundamental one. Though the three-stranded plotline ought to be a gift to any competent screenwriting team, Tolkien himself had been extremely resistant to the idea of intercutting the strands of the story in any film version. I used to think this was just a sign that JRRT didn't understand film narrative, but watching the Jackson *Towers* brings suddenly home a very basic practical problem: that the two constituent Books cover completely incompatible timespans. In Tolkien's *Towers*, Frodo and Sam end up eight days ahead of the rest of the Fellowship, who are left behind toking away and chewing the fat in Isengard, when in the Ringbearers' timeline Gandalf and Pippin are already in Minas Tirith watching Sauron's armies occupy the Pelennor. And to juggle the different plot paths in real time requires drastic adjustment to Appendix B's chronology, the contents of volumes 2 and 3, or both. The Jackson team's solution was clearly a considered one, but it's probably the worst option they could have chosen. Covering only a week in the Tale of Years, Jackson's *Towers* has offloaded about a third of the book into the other instalments, leaving this episode perilously thin on incident.

The professed reasoning is that the simultaneous attacks on Helm's Deep and Orthanc make too natural a climax to resist, while the parley at Isengard and turn to Gondor offer no strong ending material but might make helpful early scenes for *Return of the King*. But the commitment to simultaneous plot strands then requires Cirith Ungol to get pushed in its entirety to the film of *Return*, so that an entirely new climax has had to be found for the Frodo/Sam plotline within the timeline of their days in Ithilien. In a desperate attempt to fill the widening hole in the story, everyone gets shunted off to an early sack of Osgiliath, requiring a complete recharacterization of Faramir to motivate this otherwise pointless detour. ("It's all wrong," Sam lugubriously observes. "By rights we shouldn't even be here, but we are.")

The result of all this thumb-fingered unpicking and reseaming is a three-hour film in which nothing of any real consequence happens. Frodo and Sam end the film no closer to Mount Doom than they started; the power of Orthanc may have been broken, but the actual confrontation with Saruman has been postponed; Rohan has been spared, but Rohan wasn't even on the agenda in the first place till this chapter put it there, and the real war is still in the south and the future. Two volumes down, we've still only reached the episode the Bakshi version chose for its midpoint, which is going to require *Return of the King* to be a very busy film indeed. Yet if Jackson can't pull together a coherent three-hour cut even from this drastically slenderized material with the luxury of two years' post-production and a whole summer's reshoots, what hope for an adequate *Return*? It's easy to see why a director who thinks the cave-troll is the big set piece in *Fellowship*, and who is still completely obsessed with his Massive crowd-generation software, would feel that the battle of the Hornburg was the nucleus of his film. There's certainly plenty of scope to improve on Bakshi's version, which had memorably spent all its budget on animating the hairs on hobbit feet at Bilbo's party, so that by the time the story reached Helm's Dike the orcish host had to be represented by an Ian Miller still drawing with two animated spears twitching forlornly like wiper blades. But one of the problems with making Helm's Deep central is that it's a mere byway in the original storyline. Only the most obsessed reader easily remembers or cares what Helm's Deep is actually about, what they're all doing there, or who shows up with Gandalf at the relief and where they've been all this time. The solution adopted

here, which must have seemed like a good idea till they tried to make it work, is to evacuate the whole of Edo-ras to the Hornburg for what is now Rohan's last stand, allowing the insertion of a deeply pointless new section in which a refugee column gets attacked by warg-mounted Uruk-Hai and Aragorn falls off a cliff and gets separated (memo: do NOT attempt to use the old falling-off-cliffs-and-getting-separated ploy more than once per film), for no discernible purpose other than giving the deplorable Liv Tyler her contractual quota of dream sequences and flashbacks. By this point the plot has been pretty much lost in the streams of Anduin.

The replacement of Erkenbrand by Éomer tidies up one of the more confusing tangles of plotline, but at the expense of turning a key character into a strangely marginal role. Picking up on a passing hint in "The King of the Golden Hall," Éomer now spends the entire movie in exile – making welcome space for the more interesting and functional Éowyn, but requiring his whole role in the siege of the Hornburg to be substituted by a nonsensical squadron of camp-elves from Lórien. And while the Ents were always going to be difficult, JRRT would have found all his distrust of cinematic narrative horrifyingly confirmed by the elevation of hastiness into a virtue and the drastic remotivation of the assault on Isengard as a holbytlan rather than an Entish initiative. (Second-worst line in film: "That doesn't make sense to me, but then you're very small, so perhaps you are right.") Much of this seems to have been reworked in post-production; Karl Urban was cast very late, and certainly the Arwen material dates largely or entirely to the 2002

reshoots. There's presumably been studio pressure to find more for Tyler to do, which is a bit of a problem when her character doesn't appear in this volume at all. The one redeeming feature in this shambolic midsection is the unexpected detour into a part of the tale of Appendix A(v), but otherwise it feels distressingly like aimless padding – and the ending, when it finally comes, indecently rushed.

After the mostly spot-on *Fellowship*, the crash in sensitivity to source is a worrying turn, with moments of awfulness that even the worst bathos-dives in *Fellowship* could never have prepared us for. Top of the index, obviously, is That Line, the one that provokes gales of innuendo-fuelled laughter from the most awestruck audiences, and sophomoric quips of "What, here? Well, if you insist... I thought you might like me to hurl you into that crowd of orcs." But something else that seems to have been tossed is any concern for everyday Tolkienian philology, in place of which we're introduced to characters called "Theeoden" and "Smeegle." (And did nobody think, when deciding that the Tooks were the token Scots, that Pippin was going to spend most of the middle film in the company of someone he'd address as Mary?) The continuing inability of the Walsh/Boyens team to write remotely-passable JRRT dialogue leaves such few authentic lines as remain sticking out like uninjured thumbs, and even Gandalf's account of his resurrection has been garbled by some strange reshaping that leaves you wondering whether they even understood the text they were working from. It doesn't help that McKellen and Wood – the only cast members who can consistently deliver uncontaminated JRRT dia-

The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers: Below, the attack on Helm's Deep. Facing page and over page, Gollum continues to trail Frodo and The Ring.



logue as if they understood it, and Walsh/Boyens dialogue as if it were speakable – are the two whose parts are most curtailed.

It's a shame, because some of the smaller changes are intelligent and well-judged. The expansion of Eowyn's role is ingeniously and on the whole sensitively managed, pouncing on the one sexual line in the whole *LotR* ("Too long have you watched my sister") and expanding it into some fun material for a leering Brad Dourif, and it was brave to use some of her original dialogue with Aragorn (neatly transhumed from the farewell scene in vol. 3). Saruman's invention of gunpowder is a bold expansion, but neatly connects JRRT's concerns about industrialization with his reflected experience of the transformation of warfare. It's just very unfortunate timing that Jackson's *Ring* finds itself in the uncomfortable position of having rewritten Tolkien's response to the wars of his century as a text about Saddam and the Bushes – though it has to be said that it's courted some of this itself by treating Helm's Deep as a remake of *The 300 Spartans* – and the problems of representing evil in an adult way with a 12 certificate will never be cracked so long as Uruk-Hai continue to be bred with East End accents.

Some moments are frankly Pythonesque: the bizarrely over-Sarumanized Théoden; the vintage-Gilliam opening pan in on the White Mountains with muffled grunting dubbed over. It's to Jackson's continuing credit as a high lord of spectacle film-making that both the prologue and the Edoras sequence recover magnificently from both of these; but it's all too clear how precarious is his control of the whole vast enterprise at quite basic levels, and when you see those tight-packed, bullet-separated paragraphs of credits marching past at the end you can't but feel the weight of the *Ring*-bearer's burden. I'm still optimistic for *Return of the King* as the strongest of the three films, but this extended trailer for a probably still-flabbier DVD cut is a grim warning of how much is still to fight for. The battle for *The Two Towers* is over; the battle for Middle-earth is about to begin.

At the far, far opposite end of the budgetary scale is the season's other grandmaster adaptation, Solveig Nordlund's *Aparelho voador a baixa altitude* – which enjoyed a short but gratifyingly sell-out London run at the ICA in December as part of a J.G. Ballard mini-season, subtitled back into English as the rather wieldier *Low-Flying Aircraft*. This, of course, is the film version of Ballard's 1975 *Bananas* story about a world



drastically depopulated by mass abortions and infanticides following a global pandemic of foetal deformities. An unlikely piece of European Film Fund flotsam, a Swedish-Portuguese coproduction of no discernible budget, it's the latest in a series of such ventures by Nordlund, who's carved out an odd little niche for herself in Lusophone films made with Stockholm money (whence some rather contrived periodic injections of Swedish content over the TV news in this film). But both the parsimonious production values and the quirky Trans-European sensibility turn out to suit the material rather well.

Even more than *Crash*, *Low-Flying Aircraft* is an avatar of Ballard's master plot, with the four canonical characters (protagonist, wife, hierophant, vamp) traversing the boundary of obsession into the awakening of a new human consciousness, and finding that embracing entropy is the key to a radical new evolution of the species. Much of the skill of the story, which the film version struggles to reproduce, lies in the artful way it manages to delay detonation of the conceptual bombshell that the monstrous infants which have been slaughtered for decades are in fact humanity's evolutionary successors, an unimaginably different species whose sightlessness is merely a different spectrum of seeing, and whose true intelligence we will never live to understand. The original story was an open tribute to the figures and landscapes of Dali country, with the old world's death played out in the deserted tourist resorts of the Costa Brava a few miles from the inconceivable new world coming to birth, like the canvases echoed by the imminent teratogeniz-

ing of humanity, in the hills of Ampurdan inland.

Nordlund's film has had to redefine this very specific and resonant setting as an anonymous Mediterranean resort coast, which plays fine in general terms of atmosphere but does lose the key link between theme and landscape that was one of the central points of the story. In other respects, though, it's impressively faithful to Ballard's text, even down to the English character names (on incongruously Mediterranean faces) and vestigial plot details like the "Venus Hotels" that no longer serve a function in the streamlined version. Presumably for budgetary reasons, the film version has had to omit the climactic flyover of the colony of mutants inland, leaving the significance of the title even more oblique than it already is in the story. But Nordlund makes this part of the point, by refusing the parents, and the audience, the narrative reassurance of a sight of the new world to which they've surrendered their firstborn in an affirmative gesture of renunciation and faith.

The big revisionist turn is the reconfiguration of Ballard's narrative around the pregnant wife. It's a move perhaps driven as much by cinematic need as by any spirit of feminist rewriting, since the cooler male subjectivity of Ballard's narrative stance (which Cronenberg captured rather well) would be particularly hard to sustain here under the more egalitarian gaze of the camera, when she's the one nine months gone with Rosemary's mutant baby, whereas he spends most of the story smoking moodily on the balcony and fantasizing about the enigmatic young woman in shades. But the effect is still a wry critique of middle-period Ballard's sexual politics, viewing the quests of the traditional JGB narrator-figure as fairly feckless male indulgence when set on screen alongside things like the perils of pre-eclampsia. Less successful is the addition of a prologue showing the couple's escape from England, one of a number of unsubtle Orwellian touches that coarsen the conflict by deflecting the responsibility for the slaughter of innocents from citizenry to state; if I understood the credits right, the script was apparently devised as a six-handed collaboration, and not all the attempts to flesh the film out with new scenes and characters work as well as the nuclear story. But it's still the first serious shot at making the imagery and narrative of the classic Ballard shorts come alive on screen. "I'm painting the world for them," says the mysterious aviator: "painting a path for them to follow." Let's hope.

Nick Lowe

Monsters

Chris Beckett

This is Dirk Johns, our leading novelist," said the poet's mother, "and this is Lucille, who makes wonderful little landscapes out of clay..."

"Oh, just decorative," protested the novelist's tiny, bird-like wife, "just decorative, nothing more."

"And this is Angelica Meadows, the painter. You perhaps caught her recent exhibition in the Metropolis, Mr Clancy? I believe it received very good notices."

"I believe I did hear something..." I lied, shaking hands with a very attractive young woman with lively, merry eyes. "I'm afraid I spend so little time in the Metropolis these days."

"And this," went on the poet's mother, "is the composer, Ulrika Bennett. We expect great things of her."

No, I thought, looking into Ulrika Bennett's cavernous eyes, great music will not come from you. You are too intense. You lack the necessary playfulness.

And then there was Ulrika's husband, "the ceramicist," and then an angry little dramatist, and then a man who uncannily resembled a tortoise – complete with wrinkled neck, bald head and tiny pursed mouth – who, it seemed, was "our foremost conductor and the director of our national conservatory."

"Well," I said, "I'm honoured."

"The honour is ours, Mr Clancy" said the conductor. "We have all read your extraordinary books, even out here."

"William!" called the poet's mother, "let us lead the way to dinner!"

The poet turned from a conversation with the painter Angelica. He had wonderfully innocent blue eyes, which had the paradoxical quality that they seemed terribly naked and vulnerable, yet were also completely opaque.

"Yes, mother. Yes, of course."

He pushed her wheelchair through into the panelled dining room and the guests took their seats. I was given the head of the table. William sat at the opposite end, his mother by his side. Servants brought in the soup.

"William and I are trying hard," announced the poet's

mother to the whole company, "to persuade Mr Clancy that there is more to our little colony than cattle ranches."

"Indeed," I said soothingly, "there is clearly also a thriving cultural life which I would very much like to hear more about."

Well, they needed no second bidding. *Remarkable* things were being achieved under the circumstances, I was told. For the arts were struggling by with an *appalling* lack of support. Apart from the poet's mother, Lady Henry, who was of course *wonderful*, there was not a single serious patron of the fine arts to be found in the whole of Flain. Everyone present did their heroic best, of course, but not one of them had achieved the recognition that their talents deserved...

And so on. I had heard it many times before, in more provincial outposts than I cared to remember. I made my usual sympathetic noises.

It was as the dessert was being served that I became aware of the poet's blue eyes upon me.

"Tell me honestly, Mr Clancy," he asked – and at once his mother was listening intently, as if she feared he would need rescuing from himself – "had you heard of even *one* of us here in this room, before you came to Flain?"

I hadn't, honestly, and from what little I had seen of their outmoded and derivative efforts, it was not surprising. (Let us face it, even in the Metropolis, for every hundred who fancy themselves as artists, there is only one who has anything interesting to say. It is just that in the Metropolis, even one per cent still means a good many gifted and interesting people.)

But before I could frame a suitably tactful reply, William's mother had intervened.

"Really, William, how rude!"

"Rude?" His face was innocence itself. "Was that rude? I do apologize. Then let me ask you another question instead, Mr Clancy. What in particular were you hoping to see on your visit here? Please don't feel you *have* to mention our artistic efforts."

"Well, I'm interested in every aspect of course," I replied. "But I don't deny that I'd like to learn more about the fire horses."

There was a noticeable drop of temperature in the room and most eyes turned to Lady Henry, watching for her reaction.

"Fire horses," sighed the novelist John. "Of course. The first thing every Metropolitan wants to see. Yet surely you must have them in zoos there?"

I shrugged. "Of course, but then we have *everything* in the Metropolis, everything remotely interesting that has ever existed anywhere. I travel to see things in context. And fire horses *are* Flain to the outside world, the thing which makes Flain unique. It was wonderful when I first disembarked here to see boys with their young fire horses playing in the streets."

"How I wish the brutes had been wiped out by the first colonists," said the poet's mother. "Your curiosity is perfectly understandable, Mr Clancy, but this country will not progress until we are known for something other than one particularly ugly and ferocious animal."

"Yes," I said soothingly, "I *do* see that it must be irritating when one's homeland always conjures up the same single image in the minds of outsiders."

"It is irritating to think that our country is known only for its monsters," said Lady Henry, "but unfortunately it is more than just irritating. How will we ever develop anything approaching a mature and serious cultural life as long as the educated and uneducated alike spend all their free time yelling their heads off in horse-races and horse-fights, and a man's worth is measured in equestrian skill? I do not blame you for your curiosity, Mr Clancy, but how we *long* for visitors who come with something other than fire horses in mind."

"Hear, hear," said several of them, but the poet smiled and said nothing.

"Well, I'll have to see what I can do about that," I said.

But of course in reality I knew that my Metropolitan readers would not be any more interested than I was in the arch theatricals at the Flain Opera or the third-rate canvases in the National Gallery of Flain, straining querulously for profundity and missing it by a mile. "The Arts" are an urban thing, after all, and no one does urban things better than the Metropolis itself.

"I hardly like to mention it," I said in a humble voice, which I hoped would be disarming, "but the other thing for which Flain is famous is of course the game of sky-ball."

The poet's mother gave a snort of distaste.

"Ritualized thuggery!" she exclaimed. "And so tedious. I can't abide the game myself. I honestly think I would rather watch paint drying on a wall. I really do. At least it would be restful."

But Angelica the painter took a different view.

"Oh I *love* sky-ball!" she declared. "There's a big game tomorrow – the Horsemen and the Rockets. William and I should take you there, Mr Clancy. You'll have a wonderful time!"

William smiled. "Good idea, Angie. I'd be very glad to take you, Mr Clancy, if you'd like to go."

"But Mr Clancy is to visit the Academy tomorrow,"

protested his mother. "Professor Hark himself has agreed to show him round. We really cannot..."

"I *do* so appreciate the trouble you've gone to," I purred, "but if it is at *all* possible to put Professor Hark off, I would very much like to see the Horsemen and the Rockets."

For, even back in the Metropolis, I had heard of the Horsemen and the Rockets.

"Well, of course," said Lady Henry, "if you want to go to the game we must take you. You know best what you need to see. I will talk to Professor Hark. No, a sky-ball game will be... an experience for me."

"But good lord, Lady Henry" I protested, "there's no need for you to come if you don't want to. I'm sure William and Miss Meadows and I can..."

Polite murmurs of support came from the distinguished guests, but Lady Henry was resolved:

"Don't be ridiculous, Mr Clancy, of course I will come. We must sample every aspect of life, must we not? Not just those we find congenial." She summoned up a brave smile. "No, I am sure it will be *great fun*."

So we set off in the Henrys' car the next morning, Lady Henry riding up in front next to the elderly chauffeur (the seat had been removed to accommodate her wheelchair) while William and myself reclined on red leather in the back. We picked up Angelica on the way and she squeezed in between us, warm and alive and smelling of freshly mowed grass.

"I do hope you don't support the Rockets, Lady Henry," she exclaimed, "because I must warn you I'm an absolutely *rabid* fan of the Horsemen!"

Lady Henry gave a breathless, incredulous laugh. "I can assure you I really have no idea about 'supporting' anyone, Angela, but I'm absolutely determined to have fun!" cried the poet's mother bravely.

She grew braver and braver by the minute. In fact, as the stadium itself came into view and we began to pass the supporters converging on the ground, Lady Henry's brightness and cheerfulness became so intense that I feared it might blow out the windows of the car.

"What a good idea this was, Mr Clancy! What fun! The colours are very striking don't you think in this light, Angelica? Red, blue. Almost luminous. One thinks of those rather jolly little things that you paint on glass."

"Which are the Horsemen and which are the Rockets?" I asked.

"The Horsemen wear red," William began, "because their emblem is a..."

"Here, Buttle," interrupted Lady Henry, "pull over here and let me speak to this man."

A steward was directing the crowds to the various gates and Lady Henry waylaid him:

"I say, could you arrange some balcony seats for us please... I will need someone to carry me up the stairs... And our hamper too... No, no reservations... I *do* hope you are not going to have to be bureaucratic about this, as I am a personal friend of the mayor... and this is Mr Clancy from the Metropolis, the distinguished writer... Thank you so much... Here is something for your trouble... You are doing a stalwart job, I can see."

I glanced at William. I could see he was angry and embarrassed, though Angelica seemed just to be amused.

"There," said Lady Henry with satisfaction. "Drive on Buttle, thank you. Now, if you drop us off just here I believe these are the young men who are going to help us up the stairs."

With one steward unpacking our substantial picnic hamper for us, another sent off to find her a blanket and a third dispatched to search for aspirin (for she said she had a migraine coming on), Lady Henry settled into her seat and surveyed the scene.

"Of course, I have absolutely no idea of the rules, William. Just tell me what on earth these young men are going to be trying to do."

"To begin with the Rockets will be trying to get to the top, mother," said William, "and the Horsemen will be trying to get to the bottom. After each goal they reverse the direction of play. The main thing is..."

At this point the game itself began, to a great bellow from the crowd.

"The main thing is, mother..." William began again patiently.

But the old lady made an exasperated gesture. "Oh, this is all much too complicated for me. I'm just going to concentrate on the spectacle of the thing, I think. The spectacle. And it is all rather jolly, I have to admit. Rather your sort of thing, Angelica, isn't it? Red and blue painted on glass. The sort of cheerful, uncomplicated thing that you do so well."

Then a huge roar of emotion rose around us like a tidal wave, preventing further conversation. A goal had been narrowly averted. Angelica leapt to her feet.

"Come on you reds!" she bellowed like a bull.

William, watched her with a small, pained, wistful smile which I could not properly read, but did not join in. Lady Henry winced and looked away.

"I quite liked your last show, Angelica," she said, as soon as the painter sat down in the next lull, "but if you will forgive me for being frank, I am starting to feel that you need to stretch yourself artistically a little more if your work is not in the end to become a bit repetitive and predictable."

"Let's just watch the game, shall we, Mother?" said William.

Six massive pylons were arranged in a hexagon around the arena and between them were stretched at high tension a series of horizontal nets, one above another every two metres, ascending to 50 metres up. Each net was punctured by a number of round openings through which the players could drop, jump or climb, but these openings were staggered so that a player could not drop down more than one layer at a time.

All the same, if no one stopped them, the specialist players called "rollers" could move from top to bottom with incredible speed, dropping through one hole, rolling sideways into the next, swinging beneath a net to the one after, dropping and rolling again... the ball all the while clutched under one arm, and the crowd roaring its delight or dismay. "Bouncers," who specialized in upward dashes,

used the nets as trampolines to move with almost the same breathtaking velocity as the rollers, even though they had to work against gravity instead of with it.

But of course neither bouncers or rollers got a clear run. While these high-speed vertical dashes were taking place through the nets, other players were swarming up or down to positions ahead of the opposing team's rollers or bouncers in order to block them off. Pitched battles took place at the various levels, with players bouncing from the nets under their feet to launch ferocious tackles, or swinging from the nets over their heads to deliver flying kicks. It was like football, but in three dimensions and without constraints. Eight players were taken off injured during the match.

"Do you play sky-ball at all, William?" I asked in the car on the way back.

William was about to answer when his mother broke in.

"I always insisted that he should be excused from the game," she said, turning her head towards us with difficulty. "William never showed the slightest inclination towards it, and it seemed to me absurd that a sensitive child should be put through it."

"Oh, but my brothers loved it," exclaimed Angelica. "Michael must have broken every bone in his body at one time or another, but it never put him off. He couldn't wait to get back into the game."

We turned into the drive of Angelica's home. In front of her family's large and comfortable farmhouse, William got out of the car to let her out and say goodbye. A short exchange took place between them which I could not hear. I wasn't sure if they were arranging an assignation or conducting a muted row.

"Do you know, William," said Lady Henry, when he had rejoined us and we were heading back down the drive, "I'm beginning to have second thoughts about Angelica. I am not sure she is *quite* one of us, if you know what I mean. I can't help feeling that Angelica the artist is really a very secondary part of her nature and that underneath is a pretty average country girl of the huntin' and shootin' variety. Don't you agree?"

But the poet declined to answer.

"There are some fire horses for you, Clancy," he merely said, as we passed a paddock with a couple of yearling beasts in it, feeding at a manger in the far corner.

"I gather boys in Flain are given baby fire horses to grow up with?" I said.

"It's traditional, yes," William said.

"And were you given one?"

We had left the estate of Angelica's family and were back on the empty open road. William looked out of the window at the wide fields.

"Yes. My Uncle John gave me one when I was six."

"Did you learn to ride? I've seen boys in the street with their small fire horses and they seem quite dangerous."

"No, I never learned. And yes, they are dangerous. In fact Uncle John himself died in a riding accident only a few years after he gave me the horse."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't be, Mr Clancy," said William's mother, straining to turn round and look at me. "Don't be sorry at all."

My brother was a foolish and immature young man who liked to show off with fire horses and fast cars because he wanted to impress a certain kind of silly young woman. The accident was *entirely* his own fault."

I glanced at William. But he was still looking out of the window and I couldn't see his face.

"What would have been tragic, though," went on Lady Henry, "would be if I had allowed my brother to persuade William to ride – and *William* had had an accident. After all William is now Flain's foremost poet and it was obvious even at that age that he was quite exceptionally gifted. Imagine if all that had been thrown away because some stupid animal had flung him off its back and broken his neck?"

Some minutes later William, with an obvious effort, turned towards me.

"Ah, here we are. Almost home. Do you know, I think I must have nodded off a while there – I do apologize. A whisky Clancy perhaps, before we change for dinner?"

Two days before my departure from Flain, Lady Henry received some bad news about her northern estates. It had come to light that, over many years, her steward there had been embezzling funds. She was in a state of distraction that night, eaten up by competing anxieties. For whatever reason, she clearly hated the idea of leaving William and myself to our own devices, but she also found it intolerable not being at the helm to manage the crisis in the north. In the end it was the latter anxiety that won out. The following morning, after a great flurry of preparation that had all the servants in the house running around like agitated ants, she set off in the car with Buttle.

William and I took our coffee out onto the stone terrace which overlooked the park, and we watched the car winding along the drive, out through the gate and on into the world beyond. It was a bright, fresh, softly gilded morning, on the cusp between summer and autumn.

William sighed contentedly. "Peace!" he exclaimed.

I smiled.

"Mother has arranged for us to visit that sculptor's workshop this morning," he then said. "Do I take it you actually want to go?"

I laughed. "To be quite honest, no. Not in the slightest."

"Well, thank God for that. I think I will scream if we have to traipse round many more of Mother's artistic hangers-on."

We poured more coffee and settled back comfortably in our chairs. A family of deer had emerged from the woods to the left to feed on the wide lawns along the drive and we watched them for some minutes in companionable silence.

Then he suddenly turned the full blueness of his gaze upon me. "Have you read many of my poems, Clancy?"

"Yes, all of them," I told him quite truthfully. "All your published ones at least."

I do my research. When I decided to accept the invitation from William's mother to visit them, I had hunted down and looked through all six of William's slim collections, full of agonized coded allusions to his mother's catastrophic accident on the stairs while pregnant with William, his father's shotgun suicide a week before his birth. (Why

do we feel the need to wear our wounds as badges?)

"And, tell me quite honestly," William probed. "What did you think of them?"

I hesitated. "You write very well," I said truthfully. "And you also have things to say. I suppose what I sometimes felt, though, was that there was a big difference between what you really *wanted* to say and what you actually were able to express in those verses. I had the feeling of something – contained... something contained at an intolerably high pressure, but which you were only able to squeeze out through a tiny hole."

William laughed. "Constipated! That's the word you're looking for."

On the contrary, it was precisely the word I was trying to avoid! I laughed with him. "Well no, not exactly, but..."

"Constipated!" His laugh didn't seem bitter. It appeared that he was genuinely entertained. "That is really very good, Clancy. Constipated is exactly right."

Then, quite suddenly, he stood up. "Do you fancy a short walk, Clancy? There's something I'd very much like to show you."

The place he took me to was on the outer edges of their park. The woods here had been neglected and were clogged up by creepers and by dead trees left to lie and rot where they had fallen. Here, in a damp little valley full of stinging nettles, stood a very large brick outbuilding which could have been a warehouse or a mill. There were big double doors at one end, bolted and padlocked, but William led me to an iron staircase, like a fire escape, to one side. At a height equivalent to the second storey of a normal house, this staircase led through a small door into the dark interior of building. Cautioning me to be silent, William unlocked it.

It was too dark inside to see anything at first, but I gathered from the acoustics that the inside of the building was a single space. We seemed to be standing on a gallery that ran round the sides of it. William motioned to me to squat down beside him, so only our heads were above the balustrade.

Almost as soon as we entered I heard the animal snorting and snuffing and tearing at its food. Now, as my eyes adapted, I made it out down there on the far side of the great bare stable. It must have been nearly the height of an elephant, with shoulders and haunches bulging with muscle. It was pulling with its teeth at the leg and haunches of an ox that had been hacked from a carcass and dumped into its manger.

"He hasn't noticed us yet," whispered William. "He wasn't looking in our direction when we came in."

"I take it this is the same horse that your uncle gave you?" I asked him, also in a whisper.

William nodded.

"But you never rode him?"

"No."

"And *will* you ever ride him?"

William gave an incredulous snort. The sound made the fire horse lift its head and sniff suspiciously at the air, but after a second or two it returned again to its meat.

"No, of course not," he said. "Even if I knew how to ride

a fire horse, which I don't, I couldn't ride this thing now. No one can ride an adult fire horse unless it was broken in as a foal."

"Yes, I see."

"I'll tell you something, Clancy. If you or I were to go down and approach him, he would tear us limb from limb. I'm not exaggerating."

I nodded. "So why do you keep him?"

It seemed that I had spoken too loudly. The beast lifted its head again and sniffed, but this time it didn't turn back to its food. Growling, it scanned the gallery. Then it let loose an appalling scream of rage.

I have never heard such a sound. Really and truly in all my life and all my travels, I have never heard a living thing shriek like that dreadful fire horse in its echoing prison.

And now it came thundering across the stable. Right beneath us, glaring up at us, it reared up on its hind legs to try and reach us, screaming again and again and again so that I thought my ear-drums would burst. The whole building shook with the beating of the animal's hooves on the wall. And then, just as with my hands over my ears I shouted to William that I wanted to leave, the brute suddenly emitted a bolt of lightning from its mouth that momentarily illuminated that entire cavernous space with the brilliance of daylight.

William's face was radiant, but I had had enough. Seeing as he wasn't going to come I made my own way back to the door and back into daylight. Those decaying woods outside had seemed sour and gloomy before, but compared to the dark stable of the fire horse they now seemed almost cheerful. I went down the steps and, making myself comfortable on a fallen tree, took out my electronic notebook and began to record some thoughts while I waited for the poet to finish whatever it was he felt he needed to do in there. I was surprised and pleased to find my ideas flowing freely. The imprisoned fire horse had been the catalyst. It had provided that injection of darkness that I always seemed to need to bring my books to life. Inwardly laughing with triumph, I poured out idea after idea while the awful echoing screams of the imprisoned monster kept coming – and from time to time another flash of lightening through the cracks between the boards of the door at the top of the stairs.

After a few minutes William emerged. His face was shining.

"I'll tell you why I don't get rid of him, Clancy," he declared, speaking rather too loudly, as if he was drunk. "Because he is what I love best in the whole world! The only thing I've ever loved, apart from my Uncle John."

Behind him the fire horse screamed again and I wondered what William thought he meant by "love" when he spoke of this animal which he had condemned to solitude and darkness and madness.

I could find nothing to say to him. I had taken from him all I needed. I had found out how far he could go and the line which he could not cross. We walked back to the house in silence.

That night William slipped out when his mother returned, without goodbyes and leaving no explanation

as to where he had gone.

"I suppose he showed you his blessed horse?" said Lady Henry as she and I sat at supper.

"He did. An extraordinary experience I must say."

"And I suppose he told you that the horse and his Uncle John were the only things he had ever really loved?"

My surprise must have shown. She nodded. "It's his standard line. He's used it to good effect with several impressionable young girls. Silly boy. Good lord, Mr Clancy, he doesn't have to stay with me if he doesn't want to! We are wealthy people after all! We have more than one house! I have other people to push me around!"

She gave a bitter laugh. "I don't know what kind of monster you think I am, Mr Clancy, and I don't suppose it really matters, but I will tell you this. When William was six and his uncle tried to get him to ride, he clung to me so tightly that it bruised me, and he begged and pleaded with me to promise that I'd never make him do it. He would actually wet his bed with fear whenever he knew his uncle was coming to stay. Perhaps you think I was weak and I should have made him ride the horse? But, with respect Mr Clancy, remember that you are not a parent yourself, and certainly not the sole parent of an only child."

Her eyes filled with tears and she dabbed at them angrily with her napkin.

"His father was a violent, arrogant drunk," she said. "Far worse than my brother. He was the very worst type of Flainian male. He pushed me down the stairs, you know. He pushed me in a fit of rage and broke my back. It was a miracle that William survived, a complete miracle. And then, when I refused to promise to keep the story secret, he blew off his head. I wanted William to be different. I wanted him to be gentle. I didn't want him to glory in strength and danger."

She gave a small, self-deprecating shrug. "I do acknowledge that I lack a certain... lightness."

"Lady Henry, I am sure that..."

But the poet's mother cut me off. "Now *do* try this wine, Mr Clancy," she cried brightly, so instantly transformed that I almost wondered whether I had dreamed what had gone before. "It was *absurdly* expensive and I've been saving it for someone who was capable of appreciating it."

In the early hours of the morning I heard William come crashing in through the front doors.

"Come and get my boots off!" he bellowed. "One of you lazy bastards come down and take off my boots."

And then I heard him outside the door of my room abusing some servant or other who was patiently helping him along the corridor.

"Watch out, you clumsy oaf! Can't you at least look where you're going?"

He still hadn't emerged when I left in the morning for the Metropolis.

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Alarm Clock *on the* Night Table

Zoran Živković

Miss Margarita's eyes popped wide open. She realized instantly that something was wrong. Lying there in bed, staring at the ceiling, she tried to figure out what had given her this impression. Had it come from her dream? But she couldn't remember dreaming anything. That was odd because she always had dreams, and always remembered them. Then she realized what was wrong. She was surrounded by silence. Turning her head towards the night table to the left, she looked blearily at the round old alarm clock with its phosphorescent hands and two dome-shaped bells.

It had been sitting there for more than half a century. Its ticking only bothered her briefly in the beginning. She'd soon become used to it and now could not fall asleep without its steady metal throbbing. Once a year, when she took it to the watchmaker to be cleaned and oiled, she would lie awake in bed for a long time, sometimes all night. Miss Margarita used the clock only to fall asleep, not to wake up. During all these years she had never once set the alarm. There was no need for that; she was one of those rare individuals with a reliable internal clock, able to wake up at a precisely set time. Not a minute early or late.

The night before she had set her internal clock for 7.30. There was no way she could have failed to do this, for it was an invariable part of her preparations for sleep. After coming out of the bathroom, she would bring a glass of water from the kitchen covered with a saucer, although she rarely woke up at night and even then was hardly ever thirsty. Then she would read in bed for about a quarter of an hour, always from the same book, a slim collection of love poems that had been with her as long as the clock. She had learned them all by heart ages ago, but read them nonetheless. Finally, after turning out the

light, she would simply wish to wake up at the usual time. That was enough. All that was left was to close her eyes and surrender to the lulling tick-tock of the clock.

The clock hands were now standing at a position that could not be correct: 12.07. Even though Miss Margarita's eyesight had faded, she could still make out the long, black hands against the white surface with its Roman numerals. All the same, she reached for her glasses, placed next to the water on the night table where she could find them easily in the dark. After putting them on she saw more clearly, but what she saw hadn't changed. The clock had evidently stopped right after midnight. This was the first time it had stopped working completely.

She would take it to the watchmaker's right after breakfast. This would disrupt her day somewhat, but what choice did she have? She led an orderly life consisting of a well-established round of obligations. She didn't like any deviations because postponing or neglecting her duties filled her with unrest, and once it crept into her soul it was hard to get rid of. But this was an emergency. The alarm clock certainly had precedence. The thought of the clock standing broken on the night table, with her doing nothing to fix it, would upset her even more. In any case, the sooner she gave it to him, the greater were the chances that the watchmaker would fix it that very day, so perhaps she would not be without it the next night.

She had a quick breakfast. She knew her sensitive stomach might complain, but she couldn't eat any slower. Fortunately, the meal was light, as it was every morning. She crumbled one and a half slices of day-old bread into a cup half-filled with warm milk. The milk contained one teaspoon of chicory and half a teaspoon of sugar. Indeed, the sugar was always a bit more than half a teaspoon, but she considered it to be half nonetheless, scrupulously

following her doctor's orders. If she hadn't been in such a hurry, she would have waited for the bits of bread to completely absorb the milk and become soggy. But now she didn't have the patience, so she had to chew them instead of letting them slide down her throat.

It didn't take her long to get dressed either. She had two dresses for outings during the summer. She wore the less formal one to do the shopping and take her afternoon walk in the park, while she kept the other one for rare special occasions such as this one. She stood in front of the mirror for a moment, deep in thought, and then decided to put on a brooch. She didn't like jewellery and decorations, but she decided that without any accessory she would look somehow incomplete. The greatest amount of time was spent putting on her little black hat with its lace veil. Unfortunately, this could not be helped. Before, when her hair was still luxuriant, she had put her hat in place with ease, but her hair had thinned with the years, making it harder and harder. Finally, she dabbed on some perfume from a small bottle with the label half peeled off. Then, fearing that was not enough, she dabbed on a bit more.

Outside she was greeted by a bright summer morning. The air was preternaturally transparent, as though rain had just washed all the dust out of it, but there was no trace of recent precipitation. Everything was dry, announcing yet another hot day. Smiling, she headed for the watchmaker's shop, a 20-minute walk away. She had gone about one-third of the way when she was struck once again by the feeling that something was wrong.

She stopped and stared intently ahead. Then she turned her head around slowly to look behind her. She might have stayed in that position longer, but the ossified vertebrae in her neck soon started to complain. There had been no need for such exertions, however. Just one glance was enough to confirm that not a living soul was anywhere to be seen. She was completely alone in the middle of an empty street. And not only that. She suddenly became aware of something that the intoxicatingly bright morning had obscured. She had not seen a single person since leaving the house.

Strange. She went to the grocery store every day at this time and always met someone along the way. Even in the worst weather. That was her entire social life. Since she had no friends to visit or to come and visit her, the only chance she had of talking to anybody was when she ran across acquaintances from the neighbourhood each morning. There were only strangers in the distant park and her walks there were silent. Her morning conversations in the street were not particularly profound: complaints about one's health, passing on local news, exchanging thoughts about the weather, occasionally reminiscing about some bygone event. But she always felt satisfied and fulfilled after that, and the solitude of the rest of the day was easier to bear.

Why wasn't there anyone about? She mulled it over briefly but could find no explanation. She finally shrugged her shoulders. She certainly couldn't stand there waiting for someone to appear. She had to hasten on her way. Maybe the watchmaker would be able to tell

her what was going on. There must be a simple answer, but she just couldn't find it. He would probably think her a senile, or even dim-witted old woman when she asked. The best thing, actually, would be not to mention it. Was it all that important whether there were people in the street or not? This way it was even better, as though the beauty of the day belonged to her alone.

When she was almost there, she realized there was something missing in this beauty. The row of chestnut trees along the street was usually full of birds, particularly in the morning and evening, tirelessly chattering, competing with the rustling leaves in the treetops. Now only the breeze could be heard up there. Where had they all gone? There was no time to dwell on this matter, however, because another, more important one prevailed. What if the watchmaker wasn't there? What if he hadn't come to work and had gone somewhere like everyone else? That would be really hard to take. Who would repair her clock?

There was a sharp jangling of bells above the entrance when Miss Margarita opened the door. She glanced towards the counter facing her and let out a sigh of relief when she saw the hunched figure of the watchmaker, a tube-shaped magnifying glass placed on the socket of his eye. He was engrossed in a repair job. He removed the magnifying glass, raised his head, squinted towards the entrance, smiled and stood up.

"Hello, Miss Margarita."

"Hello," she replied cheerfully and headed towards the counter.

As she slowly made her way, she noticed a change on the side walls of the little shop. She remembered quite well from earlier visits that there had been two identical grandfather clocks in mahogany cases. They rang out the hour in deep, harmonious tones and seemed very formal, like soldiers in dress uniform guarding the entrance to a castle. She'd envied the watchmaker. She would have been very happy to have such a clock in her parlour, but her income did not allow this. She had not even dared ask how much they cost.

Now both walls were completely covered with alarm clocks. They came in all types, shapes, sizes and colours, from elegant to ugly, from ornate to plain. Their bells were what differed the most. She seemed to be at a doll show of metal hats worn by inappropriately stocky models. Those with two or three hats were particularly grotesque, which probably meant they had two or three heads. Then she noticed something that hadn't immediately caught her eye. The clocks weren't working. If they had, a deafening cascade of ticking would have gushed from both sides of the shop. No one would have been able to stand such noise for very long. The watchmaker did not wind the clocks after he placed them on the wall.

When she reached the counter, Miss Margarita took the alarm clock wrapped in white flannel cloth out of her brown shoulder bag.

"It's broken," she said dejectedly.

The watchmaker took the bundle and started to unwrap it. He was a small, thin man with long side-whiskers and a high forehead. He was wearing a dark

three-piece suit in a classical cut, with subtle grey stripes. The only accessory was the silver chain of a pocket watch hanging from the buttonhole on his waistcoat, leading to a small pocket on the left side. It was hard to determine his age. The best guess would be late middle age. Miss Margarita had concluded long ago that he was one of those people practically untouched by age. The long intervals between the times she saw him seemed to have had absolutely no effect on him.

"Is it slow again, like last time?"

"No, it's not. It's stopped."

"Completely?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes, completely. Last night, right after midnight. You can see for yourself. I haven't touched a thing." Miss Margarita paused, waiting for the clock to emerge finally from the cloth, and then added, "I hope it's nothing serious."

The watchmaker silently gave a cursory examination to the clock lying on the unwrapped cloth on the counter. She tried to figure out the diagnosis by the expression on his face, but it remained completely blank.

"I'll have to open it up," he said at last. "Please take a seat, it might take some time." He indicated two armchairs with a small table between them to the left of the entrance.

Miss Margarita nodded and went to sit down. She would have been just as obedient if she'd been asked to leave the operating room and wait in the waiting room while they operated on someone very close to her. She would have cast the same worried glance towards the place where the vitally important business was taking place. But she couldn't see very much. The watchmaker was hunched over, practically under the counter, working on a lower bench located in the back. All that appeared was the upper half of his head, with the watchmaker's magnifying glass once again in place, almost touching the green shade of the lamp brightly illuminating the workbench.

The silence of the multitude of clocks hanging over her, behind and in front, started to weigh her down. Although she detested noise, she now felt it would be easier to stand if they were working. It would be confirmation that time was flowing. This way, it seemed as though time had stopped and the operation on her clock could last an eternity. Nothing moved around her; the inside of the shop, together with herself and the watchmaker, seemed to belong to a pictured moment, frozen forever.

The picture nonetheless soon came to life. The watchmaker slowly took the magnifying glass off his left eye, got up, took the clock from the workbench and placed it on the flannel cloth on the counter. He then took it in both hands, went around the counter, approached Miss Margarita, and sat in the other armchair.

"I'm afraid there's nothing to be done," he said in the voice of a doctor whose patient has just had a sheet pulled over his head. "Here, see for yourself."

He put the cloth with the clock on the little round table between them. Just then Miss Margarita noticed that the clock had not been put back together. The back cover was off, revealing a tangle of tiny gears, springs, levers, screws and pins. Her eyes remained only briefly on these mechanical entrails, for she quickly turned her head to

the side. She was overcome by nausea, as though looking at an open human body in an anatomy class. The watchmaker did not notice this movement, and had already started to explain.

"These two gears here are broken. They're worn out. Unfortunately, they are highly important. You might say they are the heart of the clock. And nothing can work without a heart, isn't that so? If this were a newer model it would be easy to replace them, but no one makes spare parts any more for such old models. The manufacturers are better off selling you a new one." He sighed and turned to look at the wall covered with silent clocks. "Just like your clock, all of these could have kept time and woken people up, if only there had been parts for them."

"But I don't need a clock to keep time and wake me up." She'd thought she would never reveal her secret to the watchmaker, but now she had no choice.

The watchmaker looked at her, puzzled. "What else could an alarm clock be used for?"

She did not reply at once. She felt ill at ease, as though having to answer a doctor's questions regarding something deeply intimate. But how can you expect the doctor to help if you hide something from him?

"To fall asleep," she answered at last, softly and reluctantly. "I can't fall asleep without its ticking."

"Then maybe you should think about buying a new one? It could serve that purpose, while also carrying out all its basic functions. There's no harm in having them, even if you don't use them. I will be happy to buy your old alarm clock, so a new one won't cost very much. As you can see, I collect them." This time he gestured towards the multitude of clocks.

"No!" said Miss Margarita, almost screaming. "I won't sell it!" And then, ashamed of such a violent outburst, she hurried to add, "It's a memento, you know, a very dear one, from..."

The sentence was left unfinished, but the watchmaker nodded nonetheless. "I understand. Please let me take another look at it. Maybe something can be done if all you want is for it to tick."

He put his hands under the cloth again and took the clock behind the counter. This time the wait seemed different to Miss Margarita. Her previous apprehension was replaced by impatience. She felt naked before the watchmaker and wanted this to end as soon as possible. Whatever the result of his attempts, she would no longer have any reason to go to this shop. If the clock ticked, all the better. If it didn't, she would certainly not buy a new one. Where would she keep it? Next to the old one on the night table? That would be nothing less than a sacrilege. She would simply have to get used to falling asleep without any help. It would certainly be difficult, at least in the beginning, but what other choice was there?

From the smile on the watchmaker's face as he returned carrying the alarm clock, this time with the back cover in place, she understood she had nothing to fear.

"You were in luck," he said after sitting in the armchair. "From now on your clock will tick if you wind it regularly, although it will always show the same time." He started to wrap it in the flannel cloth. "That part of

the mechanism is still in working order. It shouldn't wear out for quite some time. Here you are." He handed her the large bundle across the table.

"Thank you," she said, taking the wrapped clock. As she put it in her bag she could hear the soft ticking, muffled by thick layers of cloth. "How much do I owe you?"

"Goodness, nothing. It was such a small thing."

"Please, I insist..."

"Miss Margarita, I doubt whether you will be needing my services any more. Consider this a small farewell present. You have been a loyal customer for many years. This is the least I can do to repay your fidelity."

She had never liked for people to give her services free of charge. If she were to insist on paying now, however, the watchmaker might take offence and this was certainly something she wanted to avoid. Particularly if this truly was, as he felt, their last meeting.

"Thank you once again. I still remain in your debt." She stood up and he did the same. They stood in silence for several moments, and then she said briefly, "Good-bye."

The watchmaker bowed. "Farewell, Miss Margarita."

She turned and headed for the door. This was the first time she'd left this shop sad and not pleased. Just a few minutes earlier she'd wanted never to come here again, and now she hoped he was wrong. The alarm clock was old, it might break down again. That would give her the chance to bring it in again for repairs. Suddenly it became important for this not to be her last visit to the watchmaker. She didn't like the hint of finality that went with it.

When she went out in the street, her first thought was that her eyesight had blurred for some reason, just like in winter when her glasses suddenly fogged up when she entered a heated room out of the cold. But it wasn't winter now, it was the middle of summer, plus she wasn't wearing glasses. Indeed, she saw better with them on, but she felt they didn't look good on her, so she preferred to strain her eyes a bit instead. Now even the strongest glasses would not have helped her see through the curtain of mist that had descended while she'd been inside. This was the exact opposite of the previous ethereal quality to the air. The world that had seemed perfectly clear before had now become completely opaque.

She leaned her back against the shop door to obtain firm support. Wrapped in greyness that made it impossible to see even the pavement on which she was standing, she seemed to be floating in midair. She stayed there without moving for a time, not knowing what to do. She thought about going back inside, but then she would be faced with having to explain and would only become hopelessly muddled. No, that was out of the question.

What else could she do? She certainly couldn't stand there for very long. Then a simple solution appeared that did, however, require considerable ingenuity and courage. She would head home. Just like that. Where else to find refuge on such an unusual day than in her house? It wouldn't be easy to get there since she couldn't even see her fingers in front of her eyes, but luckily all she had to do was go straight ahead. There were no turns. She would go slowly and carefully, using the row of chestnuts as her

guide. The trees were placed at regular intervals so once she counted the steps between two neighbouring trees, she would know exactly when to expect the next one.

It took great strength of will to leave the shop entrance and walk into the mist. Somewhere from the edge of oblivion flashed a memory from her far-off childhood when she was learning how to swim. Then she had been forced to overcome tremendous internal resistance to leave the shelter of the shore and venture out into deep water. The buoy that she'd headed for was only several metres away but to her the distance had seemed immeasurably far. She'd hugged it feverishly when she finally reached it. Now she was tempted to grab the chestnut tree the same way, its outline only starting to emerge when she was already quite close to it.

She went slowly down the street, holding one arm out in front like a blind person holding a white stick. Her eyes were wide open, although they were useless. All they saw was the fluffy dough in which she was immersed. She soon felt dizzy from staring into the unchanging whiteness. She thought of continuing with her eyes closed, but couldn't find the courage to close them and bowed her head instead. After the 17th step, when she almost crashed into the second chestnut, the relief she felt rivalled that of a castaway thrown by chance onto land by a storm.

She continued with somewhat greater confidence, concentrating on counting her steps. This feeble encouragement soon evaporated when she realized that she would not be able to tell when she'd reached home. The tree growing in front of her house had nothing unusual about it, and she didn't know how many chestnut trees there were between her home and the watchmaker's shop. She had never counted them, of course. Why would she? Who would ever have thought it might come in handy? She stopped, bewildered, and then continued her slow steps. She would think on that problem along the way. A solution was bound to turn up. Right now it was important to advance in the right direction.

Her hampered eyesight sharpened her hearing. She was between the sixth and seventh chestnut when she heard soft voices coming from somewhere in the mist. How strange people were, she thought. She hadn't met anyone during the glorious weather on her way to the watchmaker's shop, and now there was someone talking outside, in this obscurity. She crossed the distance between the next three trees, but the voices were still subdued, no louder than before, as though she'd come neither closer to those who were talking nor moved any farther away from them. Now, however, they seemed to be coming from the treetops, as though the birds had returned and were now chirping in the leaves with human voices.

She pricked up her ears and finally started to make out the words coming from above. They were disconnected parts of different conversations. Sometimes two people were speaking, sometimes three, and there were even more here and there. There were men's, women's, and children's voices, old and young. The fragments were not long: they started in the middle of a sentence and then suddenly ended, so it was hard to grasp their meaning.

Sometimes laughter would resound in different timbres: giggling, droning, chuckling, roaring. Much less frequently the conversation was serious and gloomy, and one was even filled with quiet crying.

Most voices sounded familiar to her. She was sure she had already heard them somewhere, but hard as she tried she could not call to mind the faces of those who were talking. This filled her with frustration. Her memory had recently started to fail her like this; she would be on the verge of grasping something, and then it would be maliciously whisked away. And then she noticed a regularity, a common characteristic of the bits of conversation from the chestnut treetops. There was a female voice in every fragment. Old, coughing, sometimes defiant. This was the moment of truth. She might still not have recognized her own voice – we don't hear our voice the same way others hear it – were it not for the defiance that was her manner of confronting the world, most often to her own detriment.

As though someone had pulled the veil off her memory, suddenly there were no more secrets. Regardless of how brief the fragment, she knew unfailingly when it was, where and to whom she was talking in these magically resurrected conversations. Her interlocutors' empty faces took on contours, features, characteristics. She saw them clearly on the occasions when they were talking to her, just as she could now remember the parts that preceded each fragment and followed it. Her life stood before her as clear as an open book intermittently underlined.

Making her way through the endlessly thick mist, hand stretched out in front of her, silently counting the steps between the chestnuts, she wondered whether the lines she heard spoken above were highlighted merely at random or with some purpose in mind. They were certainly not important conversations, most were just bits of small talk. It seemed to her as if someone had noted down parts of her book of life without rhyme or reason. Or else she was unable to detect any. She was just about to stop searching, when she noted a new pattern. It had to do not with the content of the fragments but their distribution in time. Each one was farther back in time than the one before it, as though the book was being leafed through back to front. The farther she got from the watchmaker's shop, the deeper she retreated into the past.

Her voice became gradually younger and softer. It wasn't hard for her to imagine the increasingly younger face that went along with it. Her wrinkles smoothed out, the loose skin hanging sadly under her chin disappeared, the spots on her cheeks vanished and so did the yellow bags under her eyes. The many aches that had started to plague her in old age also faded away. She'd lived a healthy and tranquil middle age that from this vantage point had been possibly the happiest period of her life. She'd been alone, indeed, but that was something she had already become quite used to.

Most of those she now heard herself briefly talking to were no longer among the living. She had considerably outlived them all. She ascribed this primarily to her orderly lifestyle. The others had been their own worst enemy, not paying enough attention to their health. She

knew that the most dissolute among them secretly made fun of her self-discipline and moderation, mockingly calling her ascetic, but she had been the one in a position to laugh last. She had never done this, however. She had been defiant and stubborn, yes indeed, but not malicious. The loss of each one had been hard for her. Tears came to her eyes even now as she heard their long-silent voices return once again above her.

The closer she got to her younger years, going home through the mist, the greater became her apprehension. She'd needed a lot of time and effort to block out the incident from that time that had shaped all the rest of her life. Perhaps everything would have been different had she been able to completely wipe it from her memory, but that, of course, had been impossible. Although suppressed, it was still with her, reawakening from oblivion often at the most inopportune moments. She had no way of knowing how these audible fragments from her past would treat the incident, but she felt certain they could not ignore it.

Her worries came true, but not as she had feared. Judging by the number of chestnut trees she'd counted, she must have already been close to home when the noise in the treetops suddenly ceased. She stopped in bewilderment and listened intently. Now she longed for the surreal voices that had frightened her at first. Without them she felt hopelessly abandoned in the hollow silence of the mist. Then she heard a soft sound somewhere behind her. It was repeated at regular intervals, becoming stronger, as though the source was moving closer to her. She didn't recognize it until it was almost upon her. Someone was walking down the street, heading in her direction.

Judging by the spryness of the steps, it must have been a younger man who did not seem the least bothered by the mist. Miss Margarita stood stock-still, fearing there might be a collision. He didn't know she was standing there and might easily run right into her. She had to find some way to let him know she was in front of him. She cleared her throat, but realized the same moment this was unnecessary.

Like the beam of a reflector sliding through the darkness, dispelling it, a clear oval bubble was making its way through the mist, moving down the street. When it came close to her she had a good look inside. The young man was tall and slender. His face had firm, regular features that were handsome in their accentuated masculinity. The rather long, slanted scar above his left eyebrow did not spoil this harmony; on the contrary, it even seemed to add to it in some strange way. The officer's dress uniform fitted him perfectly. He was wearing high, polished black leather boots, soft white gloves and a service cap pulled down low on his forehead, almost completely hiding his short hair. In his left hand were two small packages wrapped in brightly coloured paper and tied with red ribbons. One was flat, the other square.

Miss Margarita's breath failed her. She opened her mouth and made every effort to breathe deeply, but she suddenly seemed to be in an airless space. In addition, she was unable to move. Her heart began to pound frantically. The stiffness did not last long, however. She snapped out of it when the greyness surrounded her once

again, after the oval had passed. She took out after it almost at a run. The doctor had strictly forbidden such efforts, but that made no difference to her now. After she reached the oval she continued at a somewhat slower pace, panting as she kept to its back edge.

It was the safest way to reach home. The young man would take her there without fail. The mist was no longer an obstacle. The path stretched before her as clearly as what would inevitably come to pass. He soon turned off the pavement onto a narrow stone walkway leading across the grass to the front door. When he took off his cap and rang the bell, Miss Margarita was standing hesitantly about halfway up the walk. She knew who would open the door for him, but it seemed somehow inappropriate, almost unnatural, to look at that person. In addition, she was still very angry with her. After all these years she still could not forgive her for what she had done.

The door opened, but the young man's broad back almost completely blocked the entrance to the house. For just a moment, before the door closed, she caught sight of the hem of a light yellow dress fluttering in the draft. She still had it, but kept it out of sight so as not to awaken painful memories. Miss Margarita remained on the walk, not knowing what to do. She was still out of breath, but not just because of walking so fast. The fact that she could change nothing in that far-off past that was taking place before her once again weighed more heavily on her than any physical exertion. Since it served no purpose inside the house, the oval bubble stayed outside, resembling a tiny island in a vast downy ocean, waiting for the young man whose visit would be of short duration.

The closed door did not prevent her from seeing what was happening inside. She accepted the two little packages with delight. She had always loved presents. She untied the ribbon on the flat package first. Smiling broadly, she went up on her tiptoes, closed her eyes briefly and lightly touched the young man's lips with hers in thanks. It was just a hint, a suggestion of a kiss, but their intimacy had not yet gone any farther. The deluxe edition of poems looked magnificent. She'd wanted it so much! And how much she had wanted to receive it from him!

She couldn't imagine what was in the other package. Her patience got the better of her, as usual, so she pulled the ribbon and tore the bright wrapping paper. She quickly raised the lid of the square, purple box and looked inside inquisitively. Her smile instantly disappeared. Her face flared up as though she'd just been slapped. She shot him a look in which insult, reproach and accusation of betrayal vied for precedence. She felt her eyes fill with tears. She stood there for several moments, staring at him without a word, and then did what the sharp voice of her defiant, proud nature commanded. She roughly put everything she was holding into his hands – wrapping paper, ribbon, the book, the box and the item inside it – turned and quickly walked out of the parlour. She almost slammed the bedroom door behind her.

She leaned against the inside of the door to prevent him from coming after her. How could he have done such

a thing! After everything that had happened, the alarm clock was not only an insult but an injury. Two days earlier, while they were walking along the quay, why had she mentioned her ability to wake up whenever she wanted, without any outside help? She'd exposed herself to someone who was unworthy of it. He'd just laughed, almost as though mocking her. He'd said he didn't believe her, that no one could do something like that. And then, as though this were not enough, he'd added in a playful voice that he might believe her if he had the chance to see for himself.

She hadn't immediately understood the full meaning of his words because she was unaccustomed to such allusions. When it finally dawned on her that seeing her ability for himself meant waking up in the same bed, she turned on her heel in anger and quickly walked away from him along the quay. How could he think something like that? Who did he think she was? Why, they weren't even engaged yet! And even if they were, it would still be highly improper. He ran after her and when he reached her started to apologize, but she turned him a completely deaf ear. It was not until they were near her house that she spoke to him, her voice cold and official. She told him that he had greatly offended her and she never wanted to see him again. Never. She didn't give him a chance to say anything in reply. She had turned her back on him once again and gone into the house.

Her anger lasted all through the evening, but softened the next morning. That was also part of her nature. Remorse was the flip side of her defiance. By noon she had already shifted the blame to herself for being so hard on him. Maybe he hadn't thought anything bad; it had just been a clumsy joke; probably he'd been unaware that such a joke might hurt her. In the evening the pangs of guilt from such serious questions were almost physically painful. What if he took literally what she'd said to him at their parting? How else could "never" be understood except as "never?" She could have gone looking for him and explained that "never" was not quite as final as it might appear, but that, of course, was out of the question. Her pride would not let her regret go quite that far.

The next morning he'd come to the front door in the dress uniform he'd been wearing when she first set eyes on him four and a half months before and fallen immediately in love. A flood of joy streamed through her. She could barely stop herself from falling into his arms right then and there, on the doorstep. Only a few minutes later, however, had come the terrible slap with the alarm clock. Leaning against the bedroom door, she did not even try to hold back her sobs. It made no difference to her that he would certainly hear her in the parlour. Nothing made any difference any more. This time "never" would be absolute and irrevocable. The only thing she wanted was for him to leave. To disappear from her parlour. And her life.

And he had left. The parlour and her life. First he'd put the opened presents he brought on the table. They belonged to her and she could do what she wanted with them. He certainly couldn't take them where he would soon be heading. He hadn't had the chance to tell her the main reason for his visit. He thought briefly about knock-

ing on the bedroom door and giving her the order that had reached his house late last night. In less than three hours he would board a train that would take him straight to the front. But he hadn't knocked. He already knew her quite well. She would never open the door for him. He turned slowly around the room as though wanting to fix it in his memory. Then he put his cap back on and went out.

The oval bubble was waiting in readiness to clear his path through the mist that he didn't see. Just as he didn't see the tiny, stooped old woman that he almost brushed against. If he had been able to hear through the chasm of time that separated them, her sobs would seem strangely familiar to him. But he couldn't hear. She, however, heard the sound of his departing footsteps long after the opaque greyness closed after him. She stayed on the walk, her eyes turned towards the invisible street, until silence reigned around her once again. Then she walked the remaining bit of cobbled path to the front door of her house. The mist had once more enclosed her on all sides, but she no longer had to walk with her hand stretched out.

She went straight to the bedroom. That was where she kept a chest full of mementos. There were faded photographs, yellowed letters, items greatly damaged by the ravages of time: a past significant to her alone. Among these old things was a wilted piece of paper. She took it and slowly started to read the four lines typed on it, although just like the book of poems, she had learned them by heart long ago. This text was not the least bit lyrical, although whoever had drawn it up had taken pains to give it a lofty ring. Telegrams sent by the army to families of the dead always sound somehow wrong.

She had received it only three weeks after leaving him in the parlour and locking herself in this room. She was not related to him, but her name had nonetheless been on the list of those to be informed in case of his death. The officer who had brought the news added awkwardly that there had been no funeral. The general slaughter at the front offered little opportunity for that, and it was rare for very much of the deceased to be left to bury. After the war, of course, a great charnel house would be made for all the fallen heroes, and she would be invited to the consecration. She had never been invited, and she certainly wouldn't have gone if she had. Her connection to it certainly was not the same as that of the others.

She put the telegram back in place and closed the chest. She stood next to it for several minutes, not knowing what else to do. What time of day was it? The vast mist outside made it impossible to tell by looking out the window. This reminded her of the clock in her bag. It, unfortunately, could not help her find out the time because it no longer worked. Too bad. She had no other clock in the house. She would have to buy a conventional one. She didn't care very much about knowing the exact time, but one could not live without a clock, after all. She would keep it somewhere in the parlour or kitchen.

She took the alarm clock out of her bag and put it on the night table, then sat on the bed. The clock's hands were fixed on the time it had stopped, but it ticked steadily as though still measuring something. She stared at it blankly.

She stayed like that until she felt the repetitive sound starting to have an effect on her. It was certainly not yet time for bed, but this unusual day had completely exhausted her. Maybe she would stretch out a bit, just to have a little rest. She didn't even have to get undressed. She would just lie on the bedspread. She never slept during the day, let alone fully dressed, but what difference did it make? There was no one to see her. In any case, she was not accountable to anyone for her behaviour.

She closed her eyes. Before she sank into the deep darkness and silence, two thoughts briefly crossed her mind. She was somehow convinced that she wouldn't have any dreams. That was good. She would have the best rest that way. Who knew what dreams might visit her? In addition, this time there was no need to set her internal clock. She had no reason to wake up at any specific hour. No urgent work was awaiting her any more.

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic

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Zoran Zivkovic, who lives in Belgrade, Serbia, last appeared in *Interzone* with "Geese in the Mist" (issue 182), "Hole in the Wall" (issue 184) and "Line on the Palm" (issue 185). The above new piece is the fourth in a loose series that began with those three. Of his many books, the most recent was a slim volume of six linked stories called *Biblioteka* ("The Library," 2002), which has also appeared in English in an American anthology, *Leviathan 3*, edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Forrest Aguirre.

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Dregs

Claude Lalumière

According to an old folktale, nightmares once covered the night sky, blotting out the stars. When those creatures of darkness invaded our dreams the night sky opened up, and the stars revealed themselves.

I found the book that contained that particular story at Lost Pages, one of my favourite teenage haunts. It wasn't the only bookshop I frequented, but the books I found on its shelves were... unique. What I mean to say is that I never saw any of these books anywhere else. Not even in secondhand bookstores – the patrons of Lost Pages apparently valued its treasures too much to hawk them off in such a fashion. Or perhaps the secondhand bookdealers were too canny to let such books unto their grimy shelves once they acquired them from those desperate or ignorant enough to sell them.

Bizarre bestiaries. Dictionaries of dead, obscure languages. Maps to lands that may never have been. Essays on religions with names I had never encountered elsewhere. Obscure mythologies. Accounts of wars no history teacher had ever mentioned. Such were the wares of the bookshop that fed my teenage dreams.

I left my home town after high school. I took my first trip overseas, and, shortly after that, went to university in another city. Lost Pages was left behind, like a pass-

ing fancy of adolescence.

My parents had offered me a two-month-long voyage abroad for, as far as I could tell, two reasons – only one of which was voiced. One, they felt they could afford this luxury because, unlike most of my graduating class, I showed no interest in automobiles; most of my classmates were rewarded with a shiny, fashionable car for coming out of high school alive. The unspoken reason was that my mother and father worried that I was spending too much time in my own head. They often commented, with varying degrees of tact and concern, on my lack of friends. They judged – as it turned out, wisely – that being dropped alone in the middle of foreign lands would make me take notice of the world around me.

And so I did. I stood next to the sea at dawn, inhaling its pungent aroma. I walked through streets too narrow for automobiles, yet bustling with human activity, loud with unfamiliar languages and cacophonous sounds that swirled through my ears. I ate delicately spiced foods, enjoyed an undreamt-of variety of meats, greens and fruit. I wandered city avenues where lovers danced and kissed in the moonlight to the tunes of street musicians or their own hearts.

And there was so much more that I experienced. This

whirlpool of exotica awakened in me many unfamiliar lusts.

Two weeks into my trip – on a hot summer night periodically lightened by an elusive cool breeze – I was in a port city whose hectic nightlife clustered in a busy quarter next to the docks. Club music blasted through open doorways, mixing with the sounds of outdoor performers. The women wore short, tight dresses, advertising their physical charms to potential suitors. The men, overdressed in the heat as was the fashion, sweated the night away dancing athletically, careful never to let their eyes wander from the women they coveted.

I was mesmerized by the nimble performances of these dancers, the precision of their movements, the sway of their hips and shoulders, the sweat spraying from their brows as they swirled to the rhythms of the dance music.

I was tempted to dance myself, but there was no one I wanted to impress or seduce. It was a notion I could barely contemplate. My new experiences had yet to include sex – I had never even masturbated! The sexual energy that, unknown to me then, was yearning to break free was intensifying the self-consciousness I felt over my awkward body. Not being a fashionable young man, I was dressed to be comfortable in the heat: thin cotton pants and a T-shirt. My awareness of my appearance emphasized the sentiment that I was a child among adults. I remained a spectator.

As the evening wore on, I grew increasingly frustrated at my inability to join in the festivities. I felt cheapened by my voyeuristic role, and I was tortured by an inner conflict – the desire to abandon myself to the surrounding merriment clashing with an unshakable fear of embarrassment. Burdened with self-loathing, I decided to make my way back to the inn where I was staying, hoping to calm down enough to fall asleep.

I had been in this city for three days. Each succeeding night, I was further entranced by its vigorous night life, by the soulful music, by the simmering sexuality.

That night, as I walked back to the inn, I was overtaken several times by an extreme dizziness and had to brace myself against walls or lamp posts to keep myself from stumbling. I was not tired – quite the opposite! I was a nervous mess: exhilarated at the intensity of my experiences and angry with myself for my cowardice.

A block or two from the inn, while I was suffering another bout of dizziness, my hand failed to find a steady purchase, and I fell. A young man – he looked about my age – rushed to my side and helped me up. The contact of my rescuer's hands on my bare arms as he bent down to help me caused me to suffer the most intense bout of dizziness yet.

I took a deep breath and, with the stranger's help, I got up and steadied myself. He looked vaguely familiar: slightly taller than I, dark eyes, olive skin smooth and dry despite the heat, strong sharp features, a pronounced nose, stylish black pants and white shirt. I was dazzled by what I took to be a trick of the light: highlights of green, blue and brown shimmered in his dark hair. Probably I had seen him at one of the clubs, or in the streets

among the strollers and dancers.

His gaze locked with mine as he asked me something in a language I could not understand – he spoke so fast I couldn't even be sure which language he was speaking. He seemed genuinely concerned. I tried to mime that I was all right, livening up my risible performance with a few simple words in my own language.

He laughed at my antics. I surprised myself by laughing along with him. I was such a serious young man. Laughing at myself was a novel experience. It lifted a heavy burden from my shoulders and somewhat attenuated my feeling of self-loathing.

Looking at my companion, I remembered the handsome men dancing to seduce the eager young women watching them. I was overcome with a vision of my new friend dancing as I had seen those men dance: his hips and shoulders swaying confidently, his seductive smile directed towards me, his eyes never straying from my body –

The next thing I knew his lips were closed over mine, his tongue exploring my mouth, just as my own tongue was tasting his warm, wet mouth...

I panicked. I shoved him away from me. The dizziness was stronger than ever; I felt I would faint as easily as dust catches in the wind, but I struggled not to succumb to this weakness and ran to the inn.

Inside my room, I fell into the chair, closed my eyes and took long, slow breaths. Eventually, exhaustion conquered my restlessness. I got up and started to undress, eager to climb into bed.

Taking off my pants, I was startled by the sight of my erect penis. Of course, I'd had erections before, but I'd never paid any attention to them. This one, huge and dripping, refused to be ignored. At that moment, it occurred to me that I had felt its pull all evening.

Nevertheless, out of naiveté and habit and ignorance, I still neglected it.

Why had I never masturbated? Even now, I can't really say. Not of out prudishness, and certainly not out of some strange belief that it could be evil or bad in any way – I simply didn't.

I crawled into bed, determined to fall asleep – despite my over-engorged penis – and put this troublesome evening behind me. Tomorrow, I thought, I would check out and head for another city. I was compelled to flee. I was too young to know that no matter how far I fled, I could not escape myself.

The erection made it difficult for me to get comfortable. Nevertheless, I did succeed in falling asleep quickly.

I awoke trembling with violent pleasure and, before I could take stock of the situation, an inner explosion sent aftershocks of ecstasy rippling through my body. I was unable to make out any distinct sensation. My sense of touch was now so acute that all contact with my skin – air, sheets, anything – contributed to the sensation of being enveloped by a warm sea of delicious comfort, like a foetus blissfully floating in its world of amniotic fluid.

Slowly, I regained the ability to distinguish sensations. I felt my back bathing in a pool of sweat. I felt the cool breeze from the open window next to my bed. I felt a

warm mouth around my spent cock.

My fellator was the gorgeous young man I had met earlier in the streets. His kiss had been my first. And now he had given me my first orgasm.

He must have sensed a shift in my posture; he took his mouth off my penis and straightened up to look at my face. There was enough moonlight coming in from the window for me to make out his seductive, mischievous smile.

I recalled how he had so easily succeeded in making me laugh at myself. Again, looking at him towering over me, I could not help but recognize the comical nature of my behaviour earlier that night. What a burlesque figure I must have cut! Running scared from my own body, from my excitement, from its fulfilment, from my new friend's beauty, from the possibilities his body offered me.

As he smiled at me, I burst out laughing. Instantly, he was infected by my outburst. He leapt on me, and we hugged as fiercely as we were laughing.

After hours of exploring each other's bodies, we lay silently in bed, my head on his chest while he stroked my hair. The first light of dawn was seeping through the window. He kissed my forehead and disentangled himself from me. I closed my eyes, savouring the lingering sensations of his touch.

I heard him fumble around the room and, moments later, I felt his hand on my stomach. I opened my eyes to see him offering me a drink from what I took to be a bottle of wine. It was transparent, clearly revealing the amber fluid within.

Seeing me hesitate, he took a sip himself. Over-compensating for my timidity, I grabbed the bottle away from him, more roughly than I'd intended. I knelt on the bed and, theatrically, raised the bottle to my mouth. I swung my head backwards and let the dark liquid cascade down my throat. I nearly gagged as a result of my eagerness to show off. Rivulets of amber flowed through the burgeoning hair of my adolescent chest. He snatched the bottle away from me before I spilled the entire contents.

I coughed to regain my breath, but found myself dizzy and drowsy. The shapes around me were losing their definition. Once more, my seducer kissed me. His tongue playfully explored my mouth as I felt his fingers gently tighten around my scrotum.

I did not lose consciousness; but I could no longer differentiate my body from my surroundings, nor my self from the world.

I saw fabulous creatures burst from exploding stars. Was I myself one of many laughing monsters frolicking amongst the flames of the sun? I witnessed great migrations of majestic undersea beasts. Was I the great primeval ocean in which they thrived? I underwent uncounted metamorphoses, limbs turning into wings turning into tendrils turning into leaves turning into ripe fruit turning into stone turning into molten lava turning into dark ambrosia trickling down the throat of unfathomable deities turning into a thin old man racked by ceaseless physical pain turning into a glowing snake changing colour with every flick of its tail while negoti-

ating a path through high and dense grass turning into a pantheon of gods smashing planets asunder for their amusement turning into a stomach growling to be fed turning into a baby suckling at its mother's teat turning into a host of dark shapes writhing in the sky. I was a silent, stunned spectator to this torrent of hallucinatory visions, if visions they were.

My companion kissed my chest, and then rose from the bed. He drank the amber liqueur down to its dregs. He looked at it longingly, then bent down to kiss me. I tasted his tears. He carefully left the bottle on the night table. Did his feet and hands turn into claws? Did scales sprout from his flesh? Did his moist mouth take the shape of a beak? Did wings with feathers of green, blue and brown rise tall above his shoulders? Did he fly through the ceiling and into heavens as strange as those I had just glimpsed?

I lay in bed immobile, listening to the furious sound of beating wings.

When I could move once again, I stared at the empty bottle. Were it not for the evidence of that bottle I might have dismissed the events of the last twelve hours as feverish delusions. No, my erotic adventure had been real enough; the delightful tingling that lingered on my skin and the musky smell of sweat and semen attested well enough to that. But as to what came after I drank the mysterious liquid... Had my lover slipped me a powerful hallucinogen? To what purpose? Stupidly paranoid, I immediately convinced myself that he had robbed me.

I sprang from the bed in search of my pants. I found my wallet undisturbed. I rummaged around the room and calmed myself down. Nothing was missing. It would be many years before I made any sense of my bizarre encounter.

I enjoyed the remainder of my holiday more than I had previously anticipated, as I eagerly explored myriad new worlds of taste, smell, sound, beauty and sex. I returned home only briefly. University was a few days away.

My parents immediately noticed a change in me. I was more alert. My eyes were brighter, and I smiled much more easily. My parents deluged me with questions about my trip.

Ordinarily, I would have fled from such a barrage of attention. But I knew they were only happy to see me, and that they would miss me once I was gone to university. Also, I was very grateful for their gift to me, that vacation that I couldn't have known how much I needed. Of course, I would answer their questions. But I also knew that I could not be entirely candid.

They asked about the empty bottle I had brought back as a souvenir. I answered coyly that it was to remind me of someone special. They did not press the issue, not wanting to embarrass either me or themselves. Their thoughts were transparent. They were imagining some exotic girl, nice but not too nice, who had deflowered their shy son. The reality would have shocked them, as, in fact, would the extent of my sexual escapades. So I gave them a nice, polished version of my travels: enough details for them to know that their idea had been a success. But I

was also vague enough to let them to understand – by omission – how much of one it had been.

Yes, I had kept the bottle. It was not quite empty. There were some dregs, some few lingering drops. I had carefully sealed it and packed it. It escaped customs unquestioned and unbroken.

I was both tempted and scared to sample the liquid again, even in the tiniest amount. I did not know what to make of its effects – if indeed it had been responsible for my vivid hallucinations – and I was loath to waste it. I thought of diluting the remains in water. Drinking the results only occasionally, slowly learning to understand the visions it bestowed upon me. It was too soon. I put the bottle away, intending to leave the decision to a later time when I would have the leisure to think properly.

The few days between the return from my voyage and my departure for university went by with alarming rapidity. Did it occur to me at the time to visit Lost Pages? I can't remember – but even if it had, I would not have been able to find the time to go. And how could I have known what to look for?

To facilitate my preparations, my mother had already packed most of my things. My clothes were neatly folded into old suitcases. All of my books had already been stored in boxes, ready to be shipped to my dormitory.

In this new life, my time and mind were now occupied with my studies and the string of tedious jobs I had decided to take in order to afford an apartment that would secure me with the privacy dormitory life failed to provide.

I taught myself to cook and used my lovers, mostly men but also the occasional woman, as guinea pigs for my culinary experiments. As time wore on, the dismal failures grew farther apart, and my guests grew to eagerly anticipate the food I prepared for them. I was discreet and avoided permanent entanglements. I attracted – and was attracted to – those who yearned for an intimacy that would not shatter their daily lives or their other, more public, attachments.

I rarely returned home to my parents. They saw me for some, though not all, of the customary holidays and family events. Those visits were short and never included enough time to visit my old haunts. It was as though my previous identity had been supplanted by a new one that recognized no continuity with the past. Everything I had experienced before university – more precisely, before that summer trip that changed everything – might as well have happened to someone else.

Eventually, teaching assignments supplemented the scholarships I earned, and the two sources of income allowed me to quit migrating between minimum-wage jobs to support myself.

One night a young woman – a mischievous student whom I had met the previous semester while teaching an undergraduate survey class – noticed the bottle on a shelf among other knick-knacks nestled between piles of books.

On the floor of my living room, we were naked, the sweat of sex clinging to our cooling bodies. We were

laughing at everything and nothing until the laughter escalated into a wrestling match, into a bout of mutual tickling. I had her pinned down between my legs, mercilessly digging my fingers into her ticklish belly, but, in a surprise manoeuvre, she managed to squirm and jump away from me.

She ended up on the far side of the room, staring at the bottle. She called me over to her. "Look at how the light catches." She pointed with one hand and squeezed my buttocks with the other. "It's beautiful."

At the bottom of the bottle, where light hit the amber liquid, miniature rainbows danced. If I tried to concentrate on any particular aspect of this tiny spectacle, it hid from my sight. I had to absorb the phenomenon in its entirety, or not at all.

Why had I never noticed this? Had this effect been going on unnoticed all these years?

How could I know? I had found it simpler to ignore my memento. I suppose I passively cherished its presence, but I had yet to pursue – or even to contemplate pursuing – my investigation of its contents. A council of unacknowledged, intertwined fears sat at the heart of my negligence: that my life of pleasure would be shattered by the revelations that awaited at the conclusion of a successful investigation; that there were no answers to be found; that the liquid would turn out to be nothing more than wine or some other mundane beverage; that I had those many years ago lost my grip on sanity and been besieged by delusions; that my great moment of epiphany rested on an instance of madness; that the foundations of my personality were too shabby to withstand close scrutiny; and more, many more. However, this personal insight was still in my future, some time later than that evening, when I stood in my living room, my naked body pressed against my lover's soft back, as we both stared at the contents of my precious bottle.

It seemed, to my neglectful gaze, that the dregs were somewhat more substantial than I remembered. Hadn't there been but a few drops? There was now a pool at the bottom of the bottle.

"Tell me the story," said my lover, tucking a stray strand of her blonde hair behind one ear.

"What do you mean?" Unsuccessfully, I attempted to resume our tickling match.

"Stop it! There must be a story! What are you hiding? Tell me. Tell me!"

It dawned on me that I had, unconsciously, tried to avoid her question. I had never told anybody the story behind this bottle. Of course, since my parents upon my return from my fateful voyage, no one had thought to ask.

I had never told anyone.

Suddenly, I felt the tremendous weight of this secret. In her curious, smiling face, I sensed the potential for release and relief. To finally relate the events that changed my life.

I must have been silent for longer than I realized. She was gently stroking my chest. I noticed her looking at me, worried.

"Yes," I said.

"Yes?" she whispered back at me.

I led her into the bedroom and, then, I told her.

I told her everything. My whole life. She listened to my ramblings, paid attention to every word. She never grew impatient – or at least was sensitive enough to my needs not to show it if she did. Somewhere in this great mess of a narrative, the bottle's story came out. I omitted no detail, no matter how utterly embarrassing or unbelievably fantastic.

Why did I trust her so when I had never allowed myself to open up to anyone in this fashion before? Because I needed to. I do not mean to undermine or diminish the depth of her empathy or her curious intelligence, and certainly not the quality of her companionship. No doubt all of these aspects of her self combined to trigger my realization of this great need, this great chasm, in my life. My need may not have necessarily been to share with her, but without her I would not have been able to acknowledge – much less satisfy – it.

I can't remember how or when, but my confession segued into sex. There is no clear dividing line in my memory between the two. It was all communion – I thought I understood that word more deeply than ever before. I lost myself in my lover and became one with her.

I also can't remember when sex turned into sleep. One moment I was intoxicated by my lover's smells, our smells, the pungency of our bodily secretions... the next I was waking up, sweetly serene, to see her eyes scrutinizing my face.

I took her hand and kissed it. "I –"

"Don't say... don't say anything. Shh." She placed her fingers over my mouth. Her eyes avoided mine. "Don't."

We had been hugging in silence for a short while when she said, "We should get going. We both have busy days today." I grabbed her wrist and looked at her watch. She knew that my next class was to start in 50 minutes. I prided myself on my punctuality. I would not make my 75 students wait.

I found myself irritated that she knew my schedule. I wondered – silently – about her own affairs. What did I know of her? I became ashamed of myself, ashamed at my selfishness, my egocentrism. Did I ever inquire into her daily grind? Did I ever show any interest in the details that made up her life? I hid that lack of interest under a veneer of sophistication, under the idea that we met not to encumber each other with the boring minutiae of our quotidian routines, but to escape into an oasis of sexual delight. But wasn't all that a petty excuse to forgive myself for the lack of interest I exhibited in my friends and lovers? I was such a peacock. I was embarrassed; I now saw myself as a clumsy, transparent, ridiculous jester. As someone whose relationships didn't matter, didn't mean anything. As someone who didn't matter.

I fled to the bathroom, using the time as a convenient excuse. Any feeling of communion had been shattered. I heard her walk around the apartment, heard the clinking of a belt buckle as she was getting dressed.

"Gotta rush! See you soon!" she shouted from two rooms away. In my agitated, self-engrossed state, I failed

to fully register the uncomfortable and distant timbre of her tone. I heard the door open and close.

I focused my mind away from introspection and, instead, on the busy day ahead of me. I washed and dressed in a precise hurry and managed to step into my classroom a few seconds early.

That day was interminable. Illusions had been destroyed, and I was in no shape to deal with the wreckage. I yearned to see her, yet dreaded the prospect. I needed and feared her. Was it brave to stay alone? Was it cowardly to not call her, or anyone? Alone, I could hide from eyes that could penetrate my thin carapace. With a lover, I could lose myself in the waves of erotic fulfillment. No matter what I did, I was hiding.

That evening, I was too restless to read or work. I couldn't find any comfort in music; the familiarity of my record collection irritated me, and the radio was intolerably banal. I ate incessantly, stuffing food – raw vegetables, crackers, baking chocolate... whatever I could find – into my mouth continuously as if the slightest respite would allow some unnameable threat to invade my innards.

It was only nine o'clock when I decided to go to bed.

Beforehand, remembering the previous night, I felt compelled to walk to the shelf where rested the memento from my coming-of-age voyage. I stared at the pool of liquid at the bottom of the bottle, dazzled by its luminous effervescence and haunted by ambiguous memories. I tipped the bottle and let the spectacle of liquid and light cascade up and down the sides of the glass. I uncorked the bottle, brought it to my nose, and smelled its contents. I was no longer the inexperienced, ignorant youth who had first encountered the liquid years ago. Nevertheless, I still could not identify the fragrance that escaped from the open bottle.

I closed my eyes and savoured the exotic aroma. My lips caressed the mouth of the bottle as I recalled – with both wonder and unease – how I had come to possess it. The dampness shocked me. I clamped down on the memories and emotions the taste evoked as firmly as I recorked the bottle. I licked the liquid from my lips.

And I suddenly felt awake and vigorous. And aroused. So aroused, it pushed everything else from my mind. So aroused, it hurt. I decided to take a shower and masturbate while enjoying the hot steam.

In the bathroom, I saw him in the mirror. His beautiful face. The subtle, mesmerizing colours running through his hair.

But he was wearing my clothes, was standing where I stood.

I had turned into a doppelgänger of the mysterious lover who had left only that bottle behind – exactly as he'd looked all those years ago, when he'd kissed me.

I collapsed, tears storming out of me. And then I felt my head explode, and the bathroom vanished around me, to be replaced by –

I am a boy, looking at myself everywhere in the world. I am everyBODY in the world. I gorge on my own flesh, my

arm disappearing down my throat. HE is nowhere. I am dancing. There are many of me. I am a boy. I am a girl. I am a man. I am a woman. I am dancing. With each whirl I take off a piece of clothing. The boys, the girls, the men, the women, I, I and I take off my clothes. I and I and I and I have sex. I MAN insert my penis in an anus BOY in a mouth GIRL in a vagina WOMAN. I WOMAN rub my vulva on the stomachs of myself BOYGIRLMAN lying on the ground. I laugh and cry. I am reading a book. Every page is a mirror. I see myself but I do not look like me. I am handsome. I am beautiful. I am charming. I am elegant. I am strong. I am vulnerable. I am everywhere and it is me. It is my body. I am not me. I am a boy. I look down MY HEAD TURNS AND SPINS and there is a boy licking my anus, but it is not him. It is not me. He looks up at me. Smiling and laughing, laughing and crying. He kisses me. I taste semen in his mouth. I take off my penis and offer it to him. I run. There are many people. None of them are me. None of them are him. They all laugh, but they do not cry. I shout: WHO ARE YOU? WHY ARE YOU NOT HIM? Still, they do not cry. Where is he? The sound of beating wings. I can see myself IT IS NOT THE BODY OF A BOY running, my cloven hooves hitting the pavement, the amber blood coursing through the thick veins bulging from my hairless naked body, the lack of genitals at my crotch, the huge mouth with thick amber lips and big white teeth gaping from my belly, my full breasts covered with thick amber veins bumping against my chest. My head is spinning out of control. I am not him. On the one side, below the ring of eyes crowning my head, a penis and scrotum protrude from my face, flapping around. On the other side, a wet vulva opens deep down into my throat. I cannot cry, no tears will come. I am not a boy. I hear the furious din of beating wings. I do not see him. The black shapes come and smother me THE BODY THAT IS NOT A BOY. There is no sound. Swirling rainbows erupt from the darkness. There are bodies everywhere. Of every shape. I recognize no body.

I woke up with a debilitating headache, having no idea how long I'd slept – if I'd slept at all – profoundly disgusted by my... hallucination?... nightmare?... whatever that had been. I was terrified by its oppressive self-loathing. And what was I to make of the monstrous hermaphroditic creature "I" had turned into? Cold dread spread through my bones.

I had fallen on the floor, and I could feel how I'd bumped my head and elbows. Reluctantly, I propped myself back up. The mirror told me I was myself again. Not a monster, and not my mysterious lover either.

It was that bottle. That strange liquid was some sort of drug that produced powerful hallucinations. Of course I had never turned into anything or anyone else.

Ignoring my aches and bruises, I stomped to the shelf where I kept the bottle. I picked it up, considered smashing it, or just throwing it away. Instead, I put it in a box in the broom closet, refusing still to deal with it decisively.

I spent the rest of the day dawdling – doing this and that, not really accomplishing anything, distracting

myself with little pleasures: listening to favourite records, rereading cherished stories. In the end, it was another long, dreary day. But I managed to dismiss that frightening vision as nothing more than the result of that awful potion combined with my fragile emotional state.

A few days later, I ran into my young blonde lover at the university; but her eyes avoided mine, and I had to acknowledge what, I suddenly realized, I already knew. Ah well... I claimed not to want serious attachments, didn't I? I'd promised her sexual fun and ended up needing emotional comfort.

I broke off all my sexual liaisons and for a year or so mainly kept to myself. I needed that year to redefine my identity, to dig within myself, to discover the tools with which to rebuild myself.

I put the bottle – its contents and its disturbing visions – far from my mind.

I took to solitude rather well. It reminded me of my childhood, when I spent days locked in my bedroom, content with my books.

Eventually, I made new friends, or rather acquaintances. I met no one significant. I shared lunches, occasionally went out to the theatre and such. I surprised myself by staying celibate. My sex drive had simply faded away.

Years passed. I took a position as Associate Professor in my department. The bottle once again receded to a neglected corner of my consciousness.

I was flying to my home town, dreading a family event that I couldn't avoid – a cousin's wedding – when my parents died in a fire. The house burned down – a kitchen accident, the investigators said. The street was sealed off; my cab had to drop me off a block away. It was an impressive, angry blaze. After it had spent its fury, nothing from the house was salvageable. I was told my parents died quickly.

The wedding wasn't postponed. I didn't go.

Mom and Dad had always been so kind to me. Ours had been a peaceful and supportive household. I didn't have a single resentful memory, and yet I found myself unable to grieve. Not numb, not sad, not even relieved; just – and I hate to admit this – indifferent.

A year later, I used the money from the estate to buy a new house. I was charmed by the building upon first seeing it. The deal was quickly concluded, and within weeks I left my old apartment. I successfully co-ordinated the main floor in a few days, making it fully operational and pleasing to inhabit.

The upstairs of the house remained in complete disarray. I had been renovating, organizing and unpacking for weeks, but I just couldn't seem to make things jell. I was too excited at the prospect of creating this dream space. I wanted to do everything at once, with the enthusiasm of a teenage boy but the dwindling energy of a man nearing 40. The box now before me had not been opened in years, judging by the brittleness of the packing tape. A box my mother had packed many years ago when I had left my parents' home for university. Despite the mess around me, the pull of curiosity and nostalgia over-

whelmed other concerns, and I excitedly tore open the box.

It was filled with books I hadn't seen in years – all books I'd purchased at Lost Pages. They had such sensationalist titles: *The Transfiguration of Gilgamesh*, *Antediluvian Folktales*, *Intrigues and Scandals of the Lemurian Court*, *The Trickster Among Us*, *City of Saints & Madmen*, *Great Migrations of Extinct Branches of the Genus Homo*, and so forth. Just the kind of thing to excite a lonely boy's imagination. The more scholarly titles on the shelves of Lost Pages, many of which featured names and words – not to mention languages – that were, to me, alien and unrecognizable, had always intimidated me, though the serious young boy I had been would never have admitted it.

Antediluvian Folktales exerted a particular pull on me. Why had I never unpacked these before? They'd lain forgotten for so long. I grabbed the folktale collection, and the shop's distinctive bookmark fell out. Ignoring the huge task before me, I opened the book and started reading. I completed the first half-dozen short tales, and I started remembering when I'd first read the book at age 14, in late August, just before school started. And then an image lodged itself in my mind, from a story I now remembered for the first time since then. I flipped through the book impatiently, trying to find a particular passage to confirm my memory. On my fifth or sixth run-through, I found it: "...the rich fullness of his wings, the shifting colours of his feathers, the bright sparkle of his scales, the sharpness of his beak..." I felt my heart beat anxiously against my chest. I had to take several deep breaths to calm myself down. I returned to the beginning of the tale, "Why We Dream Nightmares."

Long ago, in the time before the Earth had taken the shape of a globe and so night was night and day was day throughout the world, the Shifpan-Shap flew every night, battling nightmares with their mighty weapons. After the sun disappeared over the horizon, the nightmares covered the whole sky with their great number, determined to descend into the dreams of women, men, children and animals. Every night, the Shifpan-Shap fought them to a standstill, never letting a single nightmare break through their ranks. If only one of them entered the realm of dreams, the war would be lost, and nightmares would plague the land of dreams forevermore. In those days, the night sky was pitch black; no stars could shine through the dense darkness of the attacking horde of nightmares. When the morning sun rose on the horizon, the nightmares cowered back into the dark embrace of their creator, Yamesh-Lot, who yearned to rule the land of dreams.

Every morning, the Shifpan-Shap uttered a great cry of victory, mocking the retreating nightmares and rousing humanity and other animals to wakefulness. The Shifpan-Shap then flew back into the city of Shifpan-Ur – the lustre of their green, blue and brown feathers revealed by the morning sun – to rest and prepare for the next night's campaign.

One of the Shifpan-Shap, Behl Jezath, was a proud and fierce warrior. Many of the Shifpan-Shap admired his youthful beauty, and the delights of his body were much coveted. Although Behl Jezath knew the love of many, he had only

love for himself. Often he would hover over still water to glance at his reflection. How he admired the rich fullness of his wings, the shifting colours of his feathers, the bright sparkle of his scales, the sharpness of his beak, the smooth girth of his phallus!

Behl Jezath grew older, as all Shifpan-Shap did in those days. His wings became sparser, his scales lost some of their sheen, his beak acquired a certain bluntness, and wrinkles appeared on his phallus. Before, his splendid beauty had been so dazzling that it outshone his great vanity. Now that his beauty was dimming, the harsh glare of his pride drove his lovers away.

Embittered, the aging Shifpan-Sho spent more and more time away from his people. In broad daylight, he flew far from Shifpan-Ur. From high above he spied on the women, men and children that the Green Blue and Brown God had entrusted to the Shifpan-Shap's protection. The lustful eyes of Behl Jezath fell on the young men just old enough not to be called boys. He saw them play with their burgeoning genitals, enjoying themselves and each other.

The Green Blue and Brown God had forbidden the Shifpan-Shap from fornicating with mortal animals, upon punishment of having their wings torn from their backs, but Behl Jezath's lust was overpowering. Day after day he flew high in the sky spying on the young men, lusting after their muscular bodies and their smooth phalluses, tempting himself with this forbidden passion.

One day, Behl Jezath decided to hide behind some trees, near a spot where the young men often gathered for their sex games. He wanted to be close to the young men. He wanted to be able to smell their muskiness and to see their beautiful bodies up close.

The young men came as expected, and the hidden Shifpan-Sho smelled their young manliness and admired their muscular bodies. Their proximity was intoxicating to the old warrior. Behl Jezath took his wrinkled phallus in the palm of his claw and rubbed himself to ejaculation. So intense was his pleasure that his wings unfurled in splendid glory. He uttered a great shrill cry. The young men scattered in fear.

Behl Jezath flew away, back to Shifpan-Ur to rest in preparation for that night's battle with the nightmare legions of Yamesh-Lot. And as he had been doing with increasing frequency, he dreamed of the young men and the sex games he yearned to play with them.

That night, a nightmare embroiled in close combat with Behl Jezath smelled the lingering aroma of his dreams. The nightmare whispered into Behl Jezath's ear and said to the Shifpan-Sho: "Warrior! My master, Yamesh-Lot, can make your dreams come true. Let me go to him now and let us meet again tomorrow night in this very spot. I will bring you the means to fulfil your dreams."

The lust coursing through Behl Jezath's veins was very powerful, and he let the nightmare return to its dark master.

The sun rose. The nightmares retreated. The Shifpan-Shap uttered their cry of triumph and returned to Shifpan-Ur to rest in preparation for the next night's battle.

Behl Jezath could not sleep all day, restless with anticipation.

The following night, the nightmare returned as promised, clutching a bottle. The creature whispered in the old warrior's

ear: "Let me pass, and you can take this bottle, the cornucopia of ambrosia. This drink will transform you into your heart's desire. One sip, and you can disguise yourself as a young human male – or whatever you desire – veiled from the wrath of the Green Blue and Brown God and free to enjoy the bodies of young men. As long as one drop remains, it will forever replenish itself. This bottle is Yamesh-Lot's gift to you, warrior, if you let me pass and enter the realm of dreams."

Behl Jezath replied: "How do I know this is not a trick, nightmare? You could easily be lying in order to win the war for your dark master."

The nightmare immediately answered: "Warrior, I propose a test! Form a clear picture in your mind of your heart's desire, and I will let a drop of the ambrosia fall on your tongue. One drop will transform you only for a short time, but it will be enough for you to believe in the power of this beverage."

Behl Jezath agreed to this test. In his mind's eye, he saw himself as a young Shifpan-Sho with his wings rich and dense, his scales bright as little suns, his phallus smooth and large, for that was his true desire.

The nightmare let a drop fall on the tongue of the aging Behl Jezath. The Shifpan-Sho felt his wings fill out, he could see his scales glitter even in the darkness of night, and his phallus was restored to its full girth.

He remembered the smell of the young men and his newly young body was filled with lust for them. Then, the effect of the one drop of ambrosia wore off, and the body of Behl Jezath regained its true age.

The nightmare said: "Well, warrior, that was the effect of only one drop! Are you convinced? Are we agreed?"

Behl Jezath hesitated, but only for a moment. "Yes," he said. "Yes, we are agreed, nightmare."

The next day, the Green Blue and Brown God was furious with the Shifpan-Shap for letting a nightmare into the land of dreams. He punished them by turning them all into immortal skeletons, forever denied all sensual pleasures. When the Green Blue and Brown God meted out his punishment, Behl Jezath was hidden from the god's view. He was disguised as a young man, trying to find other young men with whom to play sex games. However, the young men no longer played sex games amongst themselves. Their new nightmares taught them to fear such things. Frustrated, Behl Jezath flew back to Shifpan-Ur. His punished brethren saw his unspoiled form. They knew then that he had betrayed them to Yamesh-Lot, and they banished him from their midst for all time.

And so it came to pass that Yamesh-Lot won the war over the land of dreams. However, his nightmares no longer covered the night sky, and the shining stars were the source of new dreams for humanity, dreams outside the reach of the dark lord.

Trembling slightly, I sat on the floor, silently but nervously pondering this story. After awhile, I calmed down again and read the rest of the collection. There were no other references to these characters, to this tale. In an appendix, the author quoted some sources and suggested further reading for each story. "Why We Dream Nightmares" had but one reference: *Ambrosia: The History of a Cornucopia of Transformation*.

I picked up the bookmark, remembering the many

hours spent at Lost Pages. I knew I would not find the volume anywhere else. The book was on the shelves of the shop, waiting for me. It had to be.

It would have to wait, I thought. The next few days were filled with engagements from which I could not, in good conscience, extricate myself. I suppose I could have called the bookshop in advance to make sure they had the book, or to ask to have it put aside for me, or to ask to have it delivered to me. But I needed to visit the place once again, to find the book myself.

I knew in which box to find the bottle. I took it out and held it up to my face. The pool of liquid was now several centimetres deep, the bottle nearly half full.

Three days later, tense and anxious, I was on a plane to my home town. The last time I'd been there was to settle the last of my parents' affairs, about eight months ago.

As I had hoped, I found the book at Lost Pages.

Inside the bookshop, I recognized the young boy who had once been the shopkeeper's assistant, now grown up. He appeared now to be running the place with an assistant of his own, a girl in her early teens. I did not attempt to identify myself to him as a long-lost customer. I quickly made my purchase, promising myself to return one day and take the time to enjoy the experience. This short trip was an indulgence my schedule could barely accommodate.

I took a cab to the airport. The terminal was bustling. Long lineups writhed in irritated impatience. Indecipherable announcements fizzled from unseen speakers. Porters and travellers crisscrossed the huge room every which way.

A hand brushed against mine. I was aroused by the intensity of that elusive touch. I looked around, in vain, hoping to find the source of this furtive sexual thrill.

Frustrated, I joined the lineup for my airline and eventually secured a boarding pass. My plane was scheduled to start boarding in 50 minutes. I settled on a bench and savoured the anticipation of cracking open my new acquisition, eager to find answers to questions I'd long neglected.

About ten minutes later, I suddenly felt very dizzy, as if all the blood was rushing out of my head. I had to brace myself on my neighbour. At the contact, he turned his head towards me.

His face was beautiful. He now appeared to be about my age, but how could I not recognize the features of the boy who had been the first to kiss me? His greying hair had lost some of its lustre, but I thought I could still glimpse a hint of green, blue and brown.

Staring at the bulge in my pants, he laughed. I noticed my conspicuously large erection.

I regained my composure – partly because of the pleasant nostalgia his good humour called up, but also because I recognized the comical nature of my situation. I chuckled, but then a spiky chill tore down my chest.

I knew who he was, now. What he was.

I opened my mouth, ready to... interrogate him? Plead with him? Or... I never found out what I would have said. He placed two fingers on my mouth, tenderly silencing me. He looked hurt. No. Something else. Some emotion I couldn't grasp. I longed to know him better, to

understand his every gesture, his every expression.

He seemed to shrug off that feeling, and he smiled. He gave me a look – of deep compassion, perhaps? It made me feel overwhelmingly lonely.

I realized then how, these past few years, I still hadn't learned to care about anyone. I still protected myself against intimacy. Now, I was overcome by how much I wanted to care about him, care for him. It suddenly seemed so obvious to me that I'd spent all these years trying to recapture the transcendence I'd felt when he'd seduced me and, failing to ever again reach those heights of ecstasy, how I'd shielded myself against my inevitable disappointments.

He clamped his hand behind my neck and gave me a fierce kiss. He released me and nodded upwards, silently telling me that I should go. My flight was being called.

I looked into his eyes, but they refused to yield any answers. Stifling tears, I nodded back, got up, walked towards the gate. I didn't look back. I was afraid to see in his eyes the gaze of a stranger. The sound of beating wings drowned out the ambient noise around me. Did I imagine that?

I told myself that it was his wish that I leave.

Two days later, here I am in my house, in this upstairs room that I have yet to organize to my satisfaction. The book, *Ambrosia: The History of a Cornucopia of Transformation*, is closed. I have studiously read every word. I wondered how the author found all that information, and I felt a surge of envy at his ability to uncover so

much about my seducer's mysterious life.

The book mentions many of the identities Behl Jezath adopted and speculates on many more. It describes years, centuries, millennia spent in solitude – hiding and fleeing from the pride of his youth and its consequences. It tells of epochs wiped from human memory. It details how his continued life depends on the bottle of ambrosia, the memento of his terrible moment of weakness.

What will happen to him now? Why did he give me the bottle? Why had I been such a coward at the airport? I –

I stare at the bottle. It rests on the little table next to my armchair. The light from the window catches the slowly rising pool of ambrosia. Rainbows dance and swirl, flowing and erupting from the amber fluid.

Tonight, I'll sit on the roof and look at the stars. If it's overcast, I'll close my eyes, feel the chill of the early autumn wind against my cheeks, and dream of the furious beating of multicoloured wings.

Claude Lalumière describes the above piece as "a self-contained story set in the Lost Pages universe introduced in my first *Interzone* story, 'Bestial Acts' [issue 178]." Claude lives in Montreal, Canada, and his second story here was "A Place Where Nothing Ever Happens" (issue 182). He is co-editor, with Marty Halpern, of the anthology *Witpunk: Stories with Attitude*, forthcoming in 2003 from the New York publishing house Four Walls Eight Windows.

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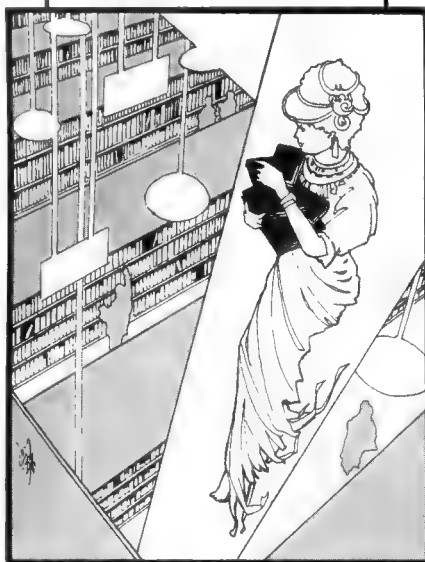
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REVIEWED

"Neo-Retro" Tales of a Time Lord

Matt Hills

Doctor Who always was something of a creative jumble – animated by its many references to science fiction, fantasy, horror, murder mystery and myth – but despite its many different incarnations and its various borrowings, the programme carried a spirit and a televisual identity all of its own. One of the pleasures associated with the BBC's range of original *Who* novels is seeing how this TV format is unfolded and twisted into new shapes.

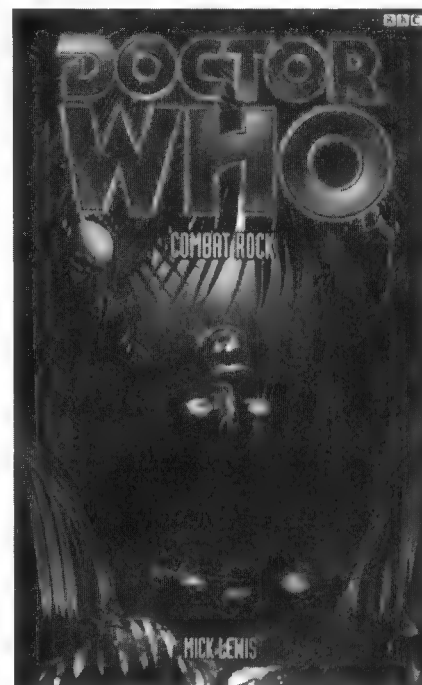
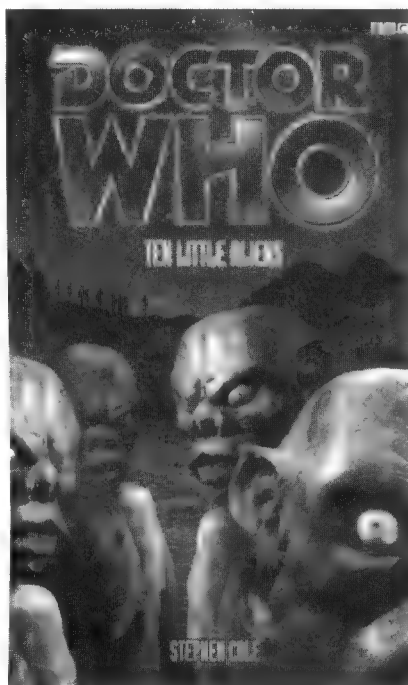
Just such a process of reinvention and tribute is on show in Stephen Cole's *Ten Little Aliens* (BBC Worldwide, £5.99, as are all the novels reviewed here). This seems like a

rather energetic adventure for the wearied First Doctor, especially as Cole keeps pointing out this Doctor's lack of physical energy. "Billy Hartnell era meets body-horror excess" pretty much sums up the creative tension at the core of this novel, with its disjunctive evocation of 1960s TV and 1980s sf/horror film seeming to defamiliarize both sets of conventions. Making excellent use of an atmospheric and enclosed setting, Cole builds narrative tension by leading the reader to expect one straightforward set of villains, before delivering something rather more shadowy and complicated.

The novel's major premise is sharply executed: the corpses of "most wanted" alien terrorists mysteriously return to life in order to attack an elite military squad sent to hunt them down. And *Ten Little Aliens* eventually displaces alien hunting in favour of real-politicking and factionalization. The body horror quotient is upped as various characters, the Doctor's companions Ben and Polly included, start to become alien monstrosities known as the Schirr. Cole's plotting is strong, and the novel also hits home via its quirky stylistic choices: introducing military characters very economically through their comments on the Schirr enemy, and pausing for a "Make Your Own Adventure"-style interlude where one has to navigate through the different viewpoints of a neural network. It's all very deliberately showy in a "Terrance Dicks never did this in his Target novelizations" sort of way, but Cole nevertheless succeeds in retooling the William Hartnell days of the TV programme as cyberpunk-ish hokum.

Combat Rock, by Mick Lewis, follows a similar trajectory of homage and reworking, although this time featuring the Second Doctor, accompanied on his travels by Jamie and Victoria. References to horror films such as *Zombie Flesh Eaters* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* turn up alongside Patrick Troughton's Doctor clowning around and playing the recorder. By infusing *Doctor Who* with the grimmest of sensibilities – *Combat Rock* includes one character whose favoured leisure pastime is to use, abuse and murder prostitutes – Lewis rewrites a family TV programme that often gestured towards the tropes and stylistic tics of horror as out-and-out horror fiction gesturing in the direction of a family TV show. It is an inversion that doesn't always work, especially as Lewis tries to combine a near "traditional" horror-lite *Who* plot – mind-altering fungus unleashes primitive behaviour and possesses people – with the exaggerated psychopathologies and gross-out, splatter antics of his mercenary characters. Placing the prim, starchy character of Victoria among such deadliness seems to particularly amuse Lewis, as if providing a focus for the novel's tonal clash between relative innocence (1960s *Who*) and degeneracy (splatter horror film).

It's interesting to speculate why certain types of horror/sf might have become all the rage in these "Past Doctor" novels. In part, this is obviously about the format of *Who* maturing as its fan-base ages. But I wonder if there is also a strange element of media/literary time travel to these creations, as writers who loved *Doctor Who* in their childhood, before moving



on to more “adult” horror/sf, run their biographies (and bibliographies) backwards, projecting later genre passions back into their earlier memories of the Doctor’s universe. This is *Doctor Who* not only as an unfolding text, but also as a retroactively re-contextualized thing.

The Third Doctor novel *The Suns of Caresh* doesn’t take splatter horror as its way into reimagining *Who*. Instead, author Paul Saint brings an astronomer’s eye to the proceedings, and a taste for literary sf. “Jeapes’ syndrome” turns up as a term for living one’s life in reverse, and David Langford’s sf writing is praised by one character in the book. This latter reference has already caused a stir among *SFX* magazine’s columnists, with Langford himself commenting upon it, and Paul Cornell (responding to Langford’s musings) insisting that Paul Saint is not a pseudonym of his.

Whether a pseudonym or not, Saint – like Cole and Lewis before him – brings his tastes in genre fiction into his *Who* writing. And while I would probably describe myself as more of a horror fan than a hard sf fan, of these three novels it is Saint’s reworking of the Whoniverse that most convinces me. To play “Fantasy *Doctor Who*” for just a moment, Saint’s work reads like a Jon Pertwee storyline as script-edited/written by Christopher Bidmead, or even like a more complicated version of Christopher Priest’s unmade and rumoured-to-be-TARDIS-obsessed *Who* outline. Either way, *The Suns of Caresh* is a tale full of the fury of TARDIS technology. Per-

haps as a result of science-fictional logics and predilections, Saint seems fixated on the narrative possibilities offered by TARDISes. He brilliantly comes up with a new type of circuit that offers psychological protection as well as camouflage for its vehicle – the atrium circuit – and presents one of the most unusual TARDIS landings ever witnessed outside the televised story “Logopolis,” as well as depicting a stone TARDIS for good measure.

Along the way, we also meet a Time Lord who regenerates into an unexpected form, and a blinded Time Lady with an unusual guide dog. Both of these leave open possibilities for further explanation and exploration, and I hope that the characters of Lord Roche and Lady Solenti will return. In fact, pairing Roche with another Doctor (the 4th or the 8th?), if not simply leaving him to work with UNIT, all seem too good to pass over.

The level of inventiveness on show in *The Suns of Caresh* is consistently stunning, down to little asides like a comment on the prevalence of emergency regeneration in Time Lord drama, and details like Saint’s repeated use of the number 18. Making one character a science-fiction fan is also a worthwhile device which never threatens to become too self-referential, even if the character concerned is ultimately dealt with authorially in an overly terse and unfeeling way. Where *Ten Little Aliens* and *Combat Rock* revel in the incongruity of their hardcore horror roots and 1960s *Who* flourishes, *The Suns of Caresh* blends intelligent sf and astronomy chameleon-fashion into the Pertwee era.

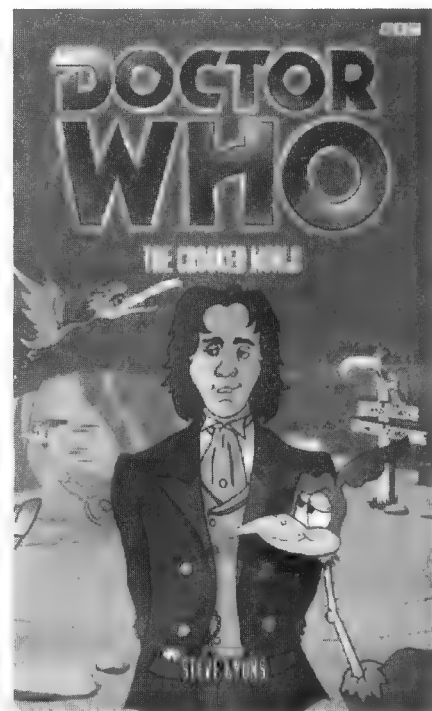
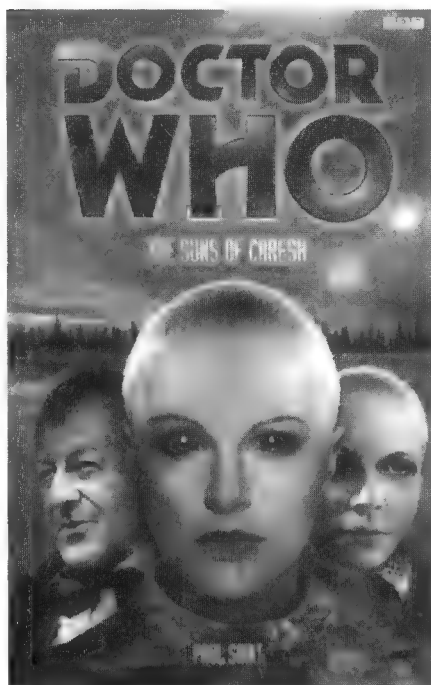
The second ongoing strand of the BBC Books’ *Doctor Who* range concerns the Eighth Doctor’s adventures. This series of books (including recent releases *The Crooked World*, *History 101* and *Camera Obscura*) has developed its own neo-mythos. The Time Lords have seemingly been wiped from History, while the Doctor now wanders through space and time on the run from his own memories. Just as Lawrence Miles shifted new *Who* on to an alien axis with *Alien Bodies* early in BBC Worldwide’s publishing schedule, his more recent *Adventuress of Henrietta Street* again managed the same trick, this time introducing an arch-villain, Sabbath, as well as leading to a turn of events whereby the Doctor was deprived of one of his two hearts.

In the wake of such events, there is an epic story arc building under the guidance of editor Justin Richards. Noughties’ Eighth Doctor *Who* is getting to grips, rather belatedly, with the science-fictional possibilities of popularized versions of quantum

physics. And as the Whoniverse becomes a multiverse, old shackles of continuity are cast adrift. The familiar old TV format isn’t just reworked here. It is creatively fractured, and with a real sense of energy and excitement that, slightly paradoxically, recaptures (for me) the heady days of the late 1980s Cartmel Masterplan. Then as now, the Doctor always seemed about to become something truly other, rather than an over-worked set of heroic contrivances. Here, an “Elemental” Doctor has again become a mystery and a provocation to himself as well as to fans of the originating programme.

However, Steve Lyons’s *The Crooked World* pretty much sidesteps the Sabbath/heart story-arc. A free-standing adventure, it features the Eighth Doctor and his companions encountering a world that has taken on the (lack of) physical laws of a child’s cartoon TV series. This allows Lyons to work his way through all manner of tributes to his favoured animated characters, although copyright presumably prevents Tom and Jerry *et al* from being named as such. Penelope Pitstop and the characters of Scooby Doo all make major appearances in thinly or barely-veiled guises, Scooby becoming Fearless the dog, while Mike Leader, Harmony Looker, Thelma Brains and Tim Coward make up the rest of the “Spook Wagon”’s occupants.

Lyons has a lot of fun mocking the limitations and the fundamental narrative repetitiveness of such source material, but he uses this repetition to his own tale’s advantage by making it a focus of *The Crooked World*’s plot.



Following the Doctor's catalyzing arrival, the rules and norms of this world are altered: death comes to cartoonland, along with free will.

And for once, there is no cartoonish villain working behind the scenes, no moustache-twirling Master trying to take over: the dilemma facing Zanytown is really one of new ideas, behaviours and freedoms, rather than one of megalomania. *The Crooked World* discovers the adult in the child through its joyous mismatch of tone and invented world, as all-too-human and all-too-grown-up questions of responsibility and self-determination are posed for and through a world of kids' cartoon characters. Lyons's tenth *Who* novel seems at first as if it is going to be a very long set of tiresome in-jokes and references. But it opens out into a sharply drawn meditation on social justice and individual guilt, as well as dealing with the cultural transmission of ideas. The turmoil depicted is less Calvin and Hobbes and more Thomas Hobbesian. And no, I'm not overdignifying this book: anyone enjoying science fiction's potential for defamiliarization will appreciate the eye for detail and deconstruction that is evident in Lyons's cartoon society.

History 101, by newcomer Mags L. Halliday, throws us firmly back into the quantum story-arc of the Doctor's missing heart. Its themes are drawn in obvious and stark ways, as history starts to break down into simultaneously there and not-there states. Halliday puts a neat twist on "alternative history thingies" (p21) by suggesting that it isn't just the facts of history that are at stake: how history is perceived comes under threat in this tale.

Taking Picasso's *Guernica* as its starting point, *History 101* shows the Doctor getting caught up in the events of the Spanish Civil War. As in previous Eighth Doctor novels, a famous historical figure is given an important role to play, and as in previous stories in this arc, wannabe Time Lord and man of mystery Sabbath works on the sidelines, manipulating events for his own ends and using agents to track the Doctor. Having Sabbath as part of the mix seems subject to a law of diminishing returns: he has little to do in this adventure, and seems rather shoe-horned in as a requirement rather than working as an organic component of Halliday's story.

The strengths of this book lie in its own historical research – displayed via a bibliographical list of reading – and in its depiction of an alien race that seeks to objectively record history, the Absolute. Where the Doctor was the source of social change in *The Crooked World*, the plot of *History 101*

also avoids cardboard-cut-out villains in favour of conveying a clash of political worldviews, and nowhere is this clash clearer than in the Absolute's view of One True History versus the Doctor's belief in individual differences in interpretation. Mind you, Halliday does fudge the argument a bit: individual differences apparently have to be contained within the consensus that sustains a timeline, so history as subjectively anarchic isn't quite an option. Although drawing links between the Absolute's broadly fascist view of One True History and fascist factions at work in the Spanish Civil War gives the novel's historical setting a relevance and resonance, these parallels don't really need spelling out so heavily. Notable for its cubist-inspired fragmentation of perspective, and its Orwellian clock that strikes 13, this addition to the range's story arc is a satisfying read in its own right.

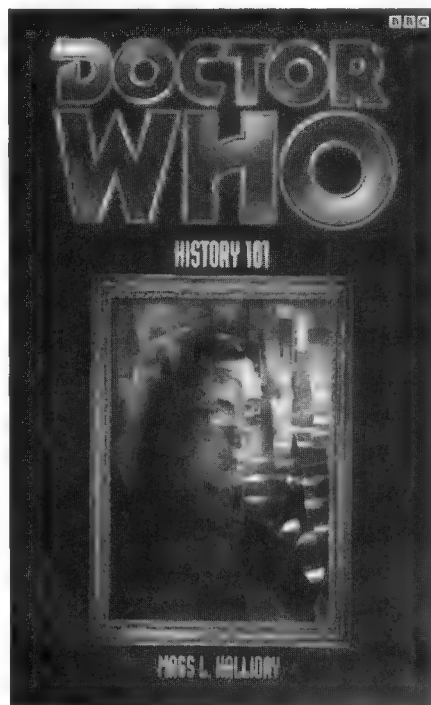
Camera Obscura, penned by Lloyd Rose, brings Sabbath centre-stage and focuses on the fact that he has stolen the Doctor's second heart as part of his bid for time-travelling powers. Presenting an interesting take on the mirroring of hero and villain, this novel has the Doctor and Sabbath working together to combat a greater evil. It harks back to many gothic infused, Victorian-era-set TV stories, dealing with themes of split personality as well as other types of disintegrated personae. Multiples and multiplication play a vital part in the complicated personal relationships recounted here, and at one point I

wondered if Rose's proposal had ever been referred to as "The Eight Doctors." Although the magic number of eight is invoked, it is not finally relevant to the Doctor and Sabbath's real nemesis. Instead, Rose settles for an apparently more conventional scenario of twins, that is nevertheless not quite what it appears to be. Continually reflecting on what type of story she is crafting, Rose seems to play obliquely with the idea that fictional characters are possible parts of their author's psyche, by working roses into her villain's fantastic, monstrous biology.

Camera Obscura boasts continually zesty badinage in its various Doctor-Sabbath dialogues, and the first few chapters of this book – featuring a séance with odd results and a magic performance involving blue phone box-sized cabinets – can almost be imagined on-screen. They beautifully create a charged and otherworldly atmosphere, hinting at menace like the best of all *Doctor Who* openings. When the ultimate source of this menace is eventually revealed, it seems rather ham-fisted (who thought that the toaster was a good idea?), but perhaps this is simply the price paid for such a spooky and suggestive build-up. The novel certainly carries a weighty, portentous sweep: rarely has the Doctor literally descended into Hell and confronted Death. This style of theological fantasy may be at odds with the science-fictional perspective of *History 101*, but *Camera Obscura* does what so many recent BBC Worldwide *Who* books have done: it brings an adult, knowing perspective to the pleasures of a format that was sometimes rather more childlike while on TV.

Whether it is splatter-horror or science-fiction genre references, political philosophy, international history, or the character of the Doctor being condemned for hubris and egotism, all these books bring something grown-up to the ever-growing Whoniverse. And none loses the sense of wonder that has always travelled with the Doctor. Calling these novels "tie-ins" or "spin-offs" hardly does them justice, as all of them – but *The Suns of Caresh* and *The Crooked World* especially – are worth the attention of readers who are not devoted fans of *Doctor Who*. As all consistently combine new-to-*Who* approaches with a nostalgic affection for the televised programme, I can think of no more fitting term for these books than that of "neo-retro" media sf. However contradictory this may seem, these books are, perhaps, only one part of a broader move towards "reimagining" or reworking the pasts of science fiction in order to find its new futures.

Matt Hills



There is a certain logic in pairing reviews of Sean McMullen's and Steven Brust's most recent novels, as both authors have chosen to approach their material unconventionally in terms of composition. In both cases, the various storylines often appear to wander in their development, at times intentionally confounding the reader's expectations, yet never straying completely beyond their narratives' principal focus. In addition, both share a wry if not always immediately obvious sense of humour.

Following closely upon the heels of McMullen's widely acclaimed "Greatwinter" trilogy, *Voyage of the Shadowmoon* (Tor, \$27.95) adroitly shifts from science fiction to fantasy without ever completely abandoning elements of the former. It is centred on the struggle for possession and control of an apocalyptic weapon, called Silverdeath, whose destructive power resembles that of a thermonuclear device although its outward manifestation, at least until set in motion, is that of a more conventional magical object: a silver chain-mail shirt that confers upon the wearer renewed youth as well restoration of the body, even in death. Set within an outwardly medieval and exotic realm in which the roles of technology and sorcery often become blurred if not reversed, the rush to gain mastery of this device provides a premise not only for heroic action and intrigue, but often a comedy of errors as well.

The primary villain of the piece, Emperor Warsovran, in a display of megalomaniacal hubris upon coming into possession of this weapon, can't wait to try it. However, he immediately discovers there is a downside to its use: it operates on the principle of convergent progression. Once set off, it continues to recharge and replicate its destruction, "twice the distance, half the time." The result is that Warsovran completely obliterates the island continent he is attempting to conquer; the only thing that prevents the weapon from destroying all life on Verral is the intervention of the ocean. As it turns out, the weapon expends its energy over water, unable to replenish itself, returning to its original quiescent, shirt-like state. Not one to be dismayed by a little miscalculation or inconvenience, Warsovran saves his fleet at a safe distance, intending to retrieve the device once it has again grown dormant. The eternal optimist, he sees no reason not to learn from his mistake and try the device again – this time more cautiously – to gain a new empire elsewhere. After all, he's destroyed only his own continent; the world possesses others. But the Emperor is not the only individual bent on acquiring the doomsday device, some for similar purposes, others to prevent its use.

Voyages and Digressions

William Thompson

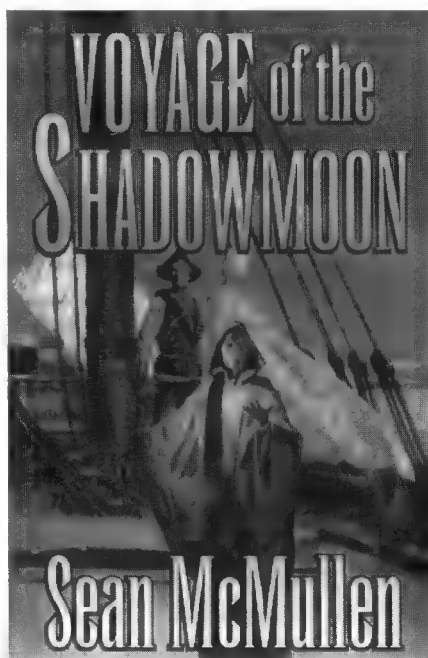
Thus ensues a mad scramble for the weapon's control that will span oceans and continents, variously involve most of the narrative world's inhabitants and cultures, and will lead many (and the reader) into adventures and mishaps delightful and unexpected.

While the basic premise may seem broadly contrived, possibly even trifling, this initial idea, in McMullen's capable hands, provides the springboard for a picaresque adventure that is one of the more original and entertaining fantasies of recent months. Convoluted and constantly shifting in its development, at times baldly contradicting its own assertions only to return to them from later vantage, through which earlier inconsistencies are perceived as matters only of incomplete perspective, the reader is challenged to follow the author's fecund and energetic imagination, as

well as a host of tertiary storylines that possess their own internal dynamics and seem initially only tangential to the main plot at hand. The rewards of doing so are as rich and varied as the author's cast of characters, and as replete as his realization of the fictional world he's created.

With its rogues' gallery and highly idiosyncratic characters, it is perhaps reminiscent of the best of Fritz Leiber. Even Warsovran has been cast in a sympathetic if darkly humorous light, and as has been noted elsewhere, villainy in this novel is "essentially universal." This creates a stage for misadventure and frustrated conspiracy that the author exploits to the fullest. Whether following the libidinous beddings of Feran, the naive plights of Princess Senterri ("who would have ever guessed that a girl's face could launch a thousand ships?"), the seductive trials of the pudgy, pastry-nibbling sorceress, Wensomer, or the varied miscalculations of nearly every character poised before a grasp for power, McMullen succeeds in marrying epic adventure with farce and parody in a manner that is refreshing in the face of so much repetitive and pedestrian fantasy. Without doubt his most remarkable character is that of the young vampyre – trapped in the body of an acne-ridden teenager, slight of stature and prone to wearing fake beards in a pretence of maturity that fools no one, he represents a burlesque of contradictory appetites and desires. Originally a squire of the Middle Ages, transported by magic to the parallel world of the novel, he exists there as the only representative of his kind, all the while remaining dedicated to the ideals of chivalry, resulting in an amusing conflict of nobility, both in his desire to achieve pure love, as well as in a rarefied sense of duty towards his feeding habits, which are at once grotesque and dictated by *noblesse oblige*. Imagine, if you will, the chivalric ideals of a Lancelot transmuted to the body of a frail, angst-ridden teenager prey to the nocturnal appetites of a Dracula, and the prospect for comedy as well as subversion of romanticism becomes gleefully apparent.

Distinctive characterization is equally complemented by the variety and wealth of the world the author has created, which, while bearing resemblances to earlier lands and cultures of our own, nonetheless adheres to its own eccentric rules. McMullen portrays his narrative real estate with a sprawling yet wonderfully detailed brush, creating landscapes that call to mind Lyonesse, or the more exotic realms of Clark Ashton Smith. In a world where sorcery abounds, with competitive schools of magic and religious orders that sanction the occult alongside more contemporary princi-



ples of science, one encounters vehicles and devices modern in resemblance, but oddly retro-engineered out of wood, stone and iron. At evening, the rings of Miral, with its three moons, cast the night into an eerie green twilight, while the etheric, that provides the basis for all of Verral's system of magic, offers a disparate plane of elementals, astral projection, soul transference, and satellite-like transmission with other worlds. Autons of energy create security fields around castles or locked-away objects, or are cast as an invisible net upon birds and animals to serve as message carriers. The author is eclectic in his mystical and magical borrowings, combining New Age notions with alchemy and traditional sorcery while threading references to both arcane and contemporary science throughout, somehow moulding their dissimilar elements into a believable and singular whole.

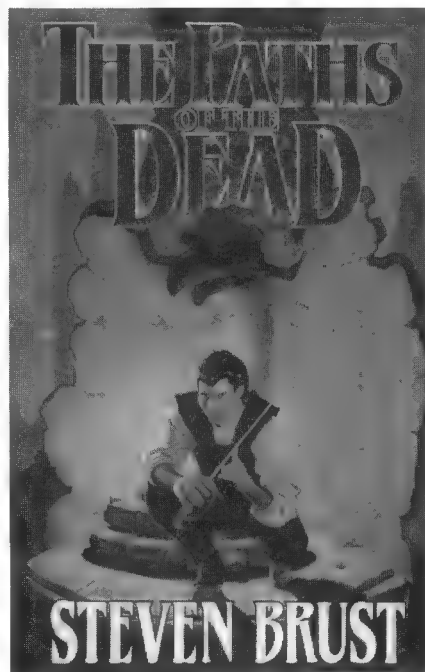
Although masterful in its handling of multiple perspective, as well as its shifting sub-plots and secondary storylines, there does exist at times a sense that in its rambling, sprawling development the author is perhaps creating his narrative as he goes along, momentarily fascinated by new characters introduced, or allowing tertiary tales to expand into their own individual potential. There is a certain loose cohesion present in how the novel evolves. Nonetheless, or perhaps because of this – that the author has allowed his characters and imaginary world full range to develop – *Voyage of the Shadowmoon* succeeds in becoming one of the best and most original works of epic fantasy published in the past year, joining the likes of Steven Erikson, Matthew Stover and China Miéville in its originality of imagination, innovation and subversion of conventional fantasy.

With *The Paths of the Dead* (Tor, \$25.95), Steven Brust returns, after an eight-year hiatus, to his “Khaavren” romances. Set in the same world as his popular “Taltos” tales, this related series provides a historical backdrop for Brust's monumental and mythical realm of Draegara, but hundreds of years prior to the misadventures associated with his eponymous and reprobate hero Vlad Taltos. Focused upon the catastrophic incidents leading to the fall of the first Empire and the Interregnum which follows, *The Paths of the Dead* picks up the story 156 years after Adron's Disaster, and quickly jumps forward 88 years, in the process stopping several times along the way to record events of significance for what will follow. Brust's third book to echo Alexandre Dumas's “D'Artagnan” romances, and the first volume of a new trilogy called “The Viscount of Adrilankha,” it turns

from the original flawed hero of *The Phoenix Guards* and *Five Hundred Years After*, Khaavren, to his son, Piro, whose peerage provides the series' title (itself a play upon Dumas's *The Vicomte de Bragelonne*, also originally published in three volumes).

As with the previous “Khaavren” romances, this novel is presented as a pseudo-history, written after the fact by Brust's alter ego, Paarfi of Roundwood. Adhering to this conceit, Brust back-fills several earlier novels' storylines, as well as fleshes out the later years of the Interregnum, the current novel poised to introduce the events and adventures that will lead to the Empire's restoration, as it exists within the chronologically later “Taltos” novels. Despite Brust's assertion through Paarfi in the Preface that new readers of the series “will need no introduction other than this volume,” or that the author(s) will have “failed in our duty should any reader feel himself bewildered because of unfamiliarity,” as can be predicted by Brust's own “Acknowledgements,” readers approaching this series-within-a-series for the first time will likely find themselves rather adrift here. Over the past 20 years Brust has amassed a vast, complex, and at times marvellous, imaginary world, whether conceived as fiction or “history,” whose scope spans several epochs, and, as is evident from fan sites such as <http://world.std.com/~main/Cracks-and-Shards/>, now demands either a photographic memory or extensive reference to avoid, as the author admits, “tripping over [one's] own feet.”

At the tender age (for a Dragaeran) of “about one hundred years,” Piro is mysteriously called on an unexplained mission to Dzur Mountain by the legendary Enchantress, Sethra Lavode.



According to the messenger, an heir to the House of Phoenix has survived Adron's Disaster, and is currently being sheltered and trained by the sorceress preparatory to restoring the Cycle and thereby the Empire. The fell Enchantress has gathered other allies to her side, including Sethra the Younger, the secretive Sorceress in Green, and Tazendra, Khaavren's former comrade. Sethra's role for Piro in her plans is unclear, but he will accompany the designated heir in an attempt to retrieve the Orb from the Lords of Judgment, possession of which will legitimize the heir's power. Of course, this necessitates travelling the Paths of the Dead, which, as readers of Brust's earlier novels know, implies a far from negligible risk. Nor is this all that may thwart Sethra's plans. A Dragonlord and self-styled Duke of Kana has carved out a kingdom from which he hopes to declare his own candidacy. In his bid, and under the guise of restoring order to the former Empire, he has gathered the leading nobles of the various Houses together, in the hopes they will join his cause. Additionally, he has enlisted the aid of another of Khaavren's former friends, Pel, who now serves him as a spy. Khaavren, meanwhile, has retired from public life, broken and embittered by his failure to save Tortaalik, and his inadvertent role in the Empire's ensuing fall. Other momentous events also appear to be stirring: a strange sorceress plots revenge in a wood; Easterners migrate west in mass numbers; and a Dragonlord warlock travels a similar path, shadowed by a priestess of the Demon Goddess and an Issola named Teldra.

Past readers of Brust will quickly pick up on the references above. Others, however, unless they are willing to dive into the author's previous dozen books, will in all likelihood find themselves lost. Granted, the rewards of reading the earlier tales are many, especially with the “Taltos” novels, where Brust has created one of the more original characters of fantasy fiction, portrayed with a verve and humour reminiscent of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser. And the imaginary realm of Draegara is as detailed and rich in lore and history as any currently available. Brust's diverse adventures also serve as more than a mere yarn, rich in intellectual riddles and references, as well as ruminations upon metaphysics, chaos, and the theories of contemporary physics (most notably evident in the recent *Issola*), making the author one of the more innovative and authentic voices writing fantasy today.

However, I cannot say that I found *The Paths of the Dead* one of his greater successes. In this novel, as to a degree in his previous “Khaavren”

romances, in his alter-identity of Paarfi the author plays with the patience of the reader. Full of authorial asides and intrusions, Brust turns to a narrative device that, to succeed, requires that the "author" assume as engaging a role as that of his other characters. Unfortunately, he fails to accomplish his goal, Paarfi's digressions devolving, more often than not, to annoying distractions. Though allowing Brust to make cutting observations concerning history and writing, some of which are quite telling (such as the discussion of tedious descriptive travel that occurs on page 127), too often they serve little relevant purpose other than to interrupt the narrative, and much of the commentary, even when valid, appears pedestrian in nature. Further, in his assumed role as pseudo-intellectual, Paarfi's commentary comes across as somewhat pompous and officious, an attempt I presume at parody and humour, but one that falls flat, making the narrator even more unattractive and obtrusive as a character.

These problems are compounded by the repetitive and stilted language of the dialogue. Rigid in its formalized stylings and courtesy, it regrettably reminds one of the verbal exchanges between Warner Brothers' Goofy Gophers. While noted for his interest in language, Brust's decision to allow his dialogue to become reiterative, each character echoing the other's questions or responses, in affected accumulation becomes tedious as well as exasperating. For example:

"You have understood me exactly."

"It may seem so, good Tевна, only..."

"Only I have never until today had the honour to hear the word 'pyrologist,' so in consequence..."

"Yes, in consequence?"

"In consequence, I have no idea what it means."

"How, you don't know what 'pyrologist' means?"

"I have not the least idea in the world, I assure you."

"And so you don't know what a pyrologist does?"

"I am as ignorant as an Easterner."

"Well, but would you like me to tell you?"

"I would like nothing better."

"Shall I do so now?"

"Why, I believe that it is an hour since I asked for anything else."

"Here is the answer then: A pyrologist is one who burns the bodies of the dead."

"You burn the bodies of the dead?"

While there may be some linguistic rationale for such an approach to conversation – and Brust attempts one in Item 12 of his "Notes," in the process only confirming the problem – as a narrative device, it proves exhausting,

and as dialogue occupies a significant portion of the book, its monotonous contrivance intrudes as much as Paarfi's digressive postulations.

Finally, the author is running multiple storylines, some of which, by the end of the novel, remain only tenuously associated, and many of which sprawl across vast stretches of geography as well as time. Certain storylines, such as that which opens the book, after several chapters are dropped, not to appear again until 200 pages later. In itself, this would not necessarily pose a problem, but when added to the various other compositional asides and digressions, as well as the temporally sprawling nature of the novel, narrative threads threaten to unravel. Characters are announced who, without the benefit of having read any previous work, exist without a readily comprehensible context. And while there is never a sense that the author is not in command of his narrative's development, and many of the secondary plot

threads offer delight in themselves, much awaits revelation in later instalments, which places the casual reader at distinct disadvantage.

I suspect that fans of Brust's previous novels *will* want to read this latest instalment, as it continues to elaborate the imaginative realm first fictionalized in 1983, and that the author has so often wonderfully built upon since. And this current series may improve with the telling. However, for the moment, it strains the bounds of readability in its discursive complexity, challenging the reader unfamiliar with several centuries of previous fictional history. The author's signature humour, which could perhaps have done much to alleviate the narrator's passages, is unfortunately also muted. And with all the narrative interruptions, seemingly parenthetical sub-stories and contrivances of language, I expect many will find the recompense not worth the effort.

William Thompson

Telos and Audio

Paul Beardsley

In 1977 *The Manitou* (Telos, £9.99) launched Graham Masterton's career as a novelist, and inspired a film adaptation by William Girdler. Twenty-five years on, the novel has been reissued by Telos Publishing Ltd. Set in then-present-day New York, the story tells of a Red Indian medicine man's bid to get himself reincarnated and take revenge on the white settlers who stole his land.

I found *The Manitou* ludicrous,



uninvolving and rather dated. The prose I would hesitate even to describe as workmanlike, and the proofreading is conspicuous by its absence. So I didn't like the story much, but I was intrigued by the (DVD-inspired?) extras. Pre-production drawings from the film adaptation are used as illustrations, but the real eye-opener is the rarely-seen original British ending, which was substantially rewritten for the American market – and it's not hard to guess why.

The premise of Paul Finch's *Cape Wrath* (Telos, £8) is slightly similar but the execution is vastly superior. This time it's a Viking – Ivar the Boneless – who makes his presence felt from beyond the grave. Being a fan of audio, I'd heard of Ivar in an early episode of Radio 4's *This Sceptred Isle*, but had little idea of what he did or why he was called "the Boneless." Suffice it to say that Finch has done his research.

This short novel concerns a party of archaeologists who arrive on Craeghatir, "a rugged, desolate isle just off the storm-ravaged point of Cape Wrath." They've come in search of Ivar's grave; they find it. The resulting story could so easily have been formulaic, especially as two of the archaeologists are bitter ex-lovers. But Finch has gone out of his way to avoid being obvious, and for the most part he



has succeeded. "It's nearly impossible to imagine just how brutal and frightening everyday life must have been," he tells us in the afterword.

We learn how to imagine it far better from this supernatural-fantasy-grounded-in-reality than we ever could from a genteel history programme on Radio 4. *Cape Wrath* is excellent and Paul Finch is a name to watch.



Some fans of *Doctor Who* claim that their favourite series is not sf, or at least not *just* sf, because it crosses genre boundaries, does a variety of styles and so on. Which makes me wonder what it is I've been reading for the past quarter century. However, I'd have to agree that Andrew Cartmel's *Who* novella *Foreign Devils* (Telos, £25 for the deluxe edition, £10 for the standard edition) isn't sf. When the Doctor arrives in Victorian England (yet again!) and meets the descendant of an opium trader he met in China a hundred years ago, it is clear that he is dealing with an actual supernatural curse – as opposed to an apparent curse with a dodgy scientific explanation.

Carnacki the Ghost-Finder features in this one, introduced to newcomers in Mike Ashley's interesting foreword about William Hope Hodgson. There's also a 1910 Carnacki story, "The Whistling Room," included as one of the "extras," along with the editorial hype from *The Idler*, the magazine it first appeared in. As for *Foreign Devils* itself, though, it's an unstructured mess of arbitrary strangeness and characters conforming to Victorian stereotype. Not recommended.

I don't think I've ever sat through a whole episode of the TV series *Star-gate: SG1*, though from what I've seen of it it's not without its merits. Keith Topping clearly thinks so; his *Beyond the Gate* (Telos, £9.99) is yer typical episode guide – enthusiastic, fan-

scholarly (surely the ultimate oxy-moron?), nit-picky, obsessive, sometimes insightful and occasionally amusing. It could have done with an index, though, or at least a contents page. Also, I'd question the wisdom of using a book's "About the Author" page as a platform to lash out at critics, especially when the critics have a point.

All the above are available from Telos Publishing Ltd, 61 Elgar Avenue, Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP (www.telos.co.uk).

On the audio front are two *Doctor Who* CD sets from BBC Worldwide Ltd. *Death Comes to Time* (£16.99) was BBCi's first ever Webcast. Despite a cast that included Stephen Fry, John Sessions, Jacqueline Pearce and Anthony Stewart Head (as well as Sophie Aldred and Sylvester McCoy, of course), it was condemned by a vociferous faction of fandom. It's certainly not perfect – the story is somewhat disjointed, villains are evil for evil's sake, and platitude-merchants tell us "there is no light without darkness" – but on the whole it is really not that bad.



Whereas Big Finish try to make their plays sound like the old TV series, there's a sense that the team responsible for *Death Comes to Time* have moved on – they know they're working with audio, and they're trying to play to that medium's strengths. They've reimagined the Time Lords, broadened the canvas to include other worlds besides Earth, and used some choice classical music for the soundtrack. The resulting production has an epic feel to it, somewhat reminiscent of John Boorman's film *Excalibur*. Curiously, I find myself listening to it in the same way I might listen to a Hawkwind album.

The Savages (£13.99) is the audio-only version of a William Hartnell serial, narrated by Peter Purves and set on a world where the "civilized" Elders steal life force from the hapless Savages. It's got a 1930s pulp-magazine feel to it – not terribly good, but it fills a gap in the era of the first and finest Doctor.

Paul Beardsley

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by David Pringle

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(Scolar Press, 1995)

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This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Adams, Douglas. **The Salmon of Doubt: Hitchhiking the Galaxy One Last Time.** Edited by Peter Guzzardi. Foreword by Stephen Fry. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32312-1, xxxvii+284pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Humorous sf novel fragment and non-fiction collection, first published in the UK, 2002; we didn't see the hardcover of this, Adams's last book, but it turns out to be quite a substantial volume – a well-edited *festschrift* of Adamsiana: articles, interviews, tributes, and a stray short story or two; recommended to everyone who admired him; the eponymous unfinished novel, a "Dirk Gently" story [eleven short chapters, very fragmentary], occupies pages 191-270 of the book.) 10th January 2003.

Brin, David. **Kil'n People.** "A future thriller." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-152-7, 612pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; it's about a private investigator in world of duplicate people.) December 2002.

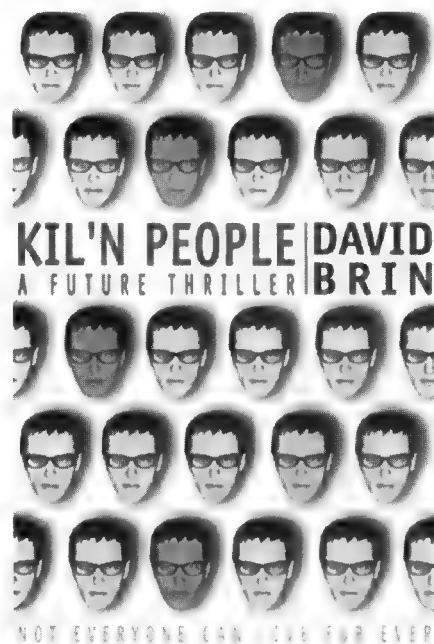
Brust, Steven. **The Paths of the Dead: Book One of The Viscount of Adrilankha.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86478-7, 399pp, hardcover, cover by Eric Bowman, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; first of a new trilogy which is a follow-up to Brust's previous fantastic swashbucklers, *The Phoenix Guards* [1991] and *Five Hundred Years After* [1994]; the whole series is, of course, designed on the plan of Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* [1844], *Twenty Years After* [1845] and the multi-volume *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne* [1847-1850] – Dumas was the original prolific pulpster; the initials "P.J.F." appear after the author's name on the title page of this book, but not on the cover – we are told they stand for "Pre-Joycean Fellowship" [Joycean as in James Joyce], an anti-literary point that hardly needs rubbing in given Brust's evident debt to Dumas; reviewed by William Thompson in this issue of *Interzone*.) 23rd December 2002.

Cadigan, Pat, ed. **The Ultimate Cyberpunk.** ibooks, ISBN 0-7434-5239-9, xiv+399pp, trade paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, £10.99. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 2002; this is the American first edition of September 2002 with a British price

and publication date added; co-copyrighted "Tekno-Books," and therefore a Martin H. Greenberg production, it contains all-reprint stories in a cyberpunkish vein by Greg Bear, Alfred Bester, Philip K. Dick, William Gibson, Paul J. McAuley, Rudy Rucker, Lewis Shiner, John Shirley, Cordwainer Smith, Bruce Sterling, Michael Swanwick and James Tiptree, Jr.; it also contains a "16-page full color section from the 'lost' volume of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* graphic novel"; see the publishers' website, www.ibooksinc.com, for further details.) December 2002.

Cady, Jack. **Ghosts of Yesterday: Stories.** Night Shade Books [501 S. Willamette St., Newberg, OR 97132, USA], ISBN 1-892389-48-7, 236pp, trade paperback, cover by Jeremy Lassen, \$15. (Horror/fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at \$27 [not seen] and a signed, limited, slip-cased edition priced at \$60 [not seen]; it contains ten stories, seven of them previously unpublished, plus two essays, "On Writing the Ghost Story" and "Science Fiction, Utopia, and the Spirit"; a handsome-looking collection by a somewhat underrated author – recommended.) February 2003.

Cash, Steve. **The Meq.** "A lyric fantasy." Macmillan, ISBN 1-4050-0011-2, 432pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2003; it's about "an ancient, mysterious, secretive race that has lived amongst us for centuries, their destiny forever intertwined with that of ordinary mortals"; the author is an American country-rock musician; this is his debut novel – and the first of a trilogy.) 23rd January 2003.



BOOKS RECEIVED



DECEMBER 2002

Clayton, Jo, and Kevin Andrew Murphy. **Drum into Silence.** "The concluding volume in the *Drums of Chaos* trilogy." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86120-6, 399pp, hardcover, cover by Greg Call, \$26.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up, presumably largely written by Murphy, to the late Jo Clayton's novels *Drum Warning* [1996] and *Drum Calls* [1997].) 19th December 2002.

Clemens, James. **Wit'ch Storm: Book Two of The Banned and the Banished.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-151-9, 630pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; the sequel to *Wit'ch Fire* [1998], and it's copyrighted in the name of Jim Czajkowski.) December 2002.

Cockayne, Steve. **Wanderers and Islanders: Legends of the Land, Book One.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-153-5, 397pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; a debut novel by a new writer who lives in Leicestershire and works as a lecturer in Media & Production Studies; reviewed by Iain Emsley in *Interzone* 180.) January 2003.

Dann, Jack. **Jubilee.** Foreword by John Kessel. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30676-X, 441pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in Australia, 2001; proof copy received; Jack Dann, an American author who moved to Australia some years ago, seems to be enjoying the pleasures of belatedly becoming a big fish in a small pond; this volume is a celebratory "Best of," containing

17 of Dann's stories from his three decades of writing, several of them of novella length; states the back-cover blurb; "this collection... demonstrates why critics have compared his work to that of Jorge Luis Borges, Roald Dahl, J. G. Ballard, and Philip K. Dick.") *January 2003.*

Dart-Thornton, Cecilia. **The Lady of the Sorrows: The Bitterbynde, Book II.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-90756-6, xv+477pp, C-format paperback, cover by Paul Gregory, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2002; sequel to *The Ill-Made Mute* [2001], which was reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 173.) *24th January 2003.*

Davidson, Avram. **The Other Nineteenth Century: A Story Collection.** Edited by Grania Davis and Henry Wessells. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87492-8, 327pp, trade paperback, cover by Tom Kidd, \$15.95. (Fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 2001; it contains 23 "long-out-of-print" stories on mainly historical themes – "strange Mitteleuropas... magic in Victorian England and on the American frontier" – by the late lamented Davidson [1923-1993]; a long subtitle just about sums it up: "Containing Startling Revelations of the Lives of Literary Persons; also, Truthful Accounts of Living Fossils, Montaverde's Camera, The Irradiofusion Machine, and El Vilvoy de las Islas; with Heinous Crimes, Noble Ladies in Adversity, Brilliant Detections, Imperial Eunuchs, Political Machinations, etc., etc.") *18th December 2002.*

Dickinson, Charles. **A Shortcut in Time.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-765-30579-8, 288pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy [?] novel, first edition; proof copy received; according to the accompanying publicity letter from editor David G. Hartwell, "this is a novel with a Ray Bradbury setting and a Jack Finney plot, told in a manner reminiscent of Jonathan Carroll... It is not a work of genre fiction, but a contemporary novel of considerable achievement" – make of that what you will; the author, who lives near Chicago, has written several earlier non-generic novels, although none in the last ten years.) *January 2003.*

Doctorow, Cory. **Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30436-8, 206pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a slim futuristic satire on Disneyworld, this is its Canadian author's debut novel: on the strength of his short stories [one of which, "The Rebranding of Billy Bailey," appeared in *Interzone* 158], he won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2000.) *February 2003.*

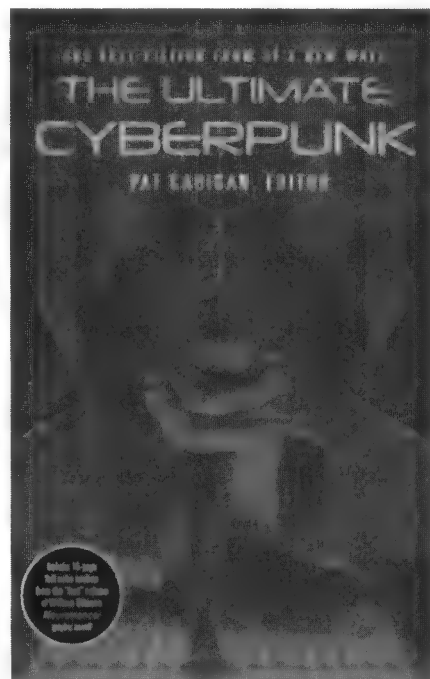
Douglass, Sara. **Hades' Daughter: Book One of The Troy Game.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-

30540-2, 592pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received; Australia's most successful Big Commercial Fantasy author invades Mary Renault territory: this one is set in Bronze Age Greece.) *January 2003.*

Elgin, Suzette Haden. **Earthsong: Native Tongue, 3.** Afterword by Susan M. Squier and Julie Vedder. The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, ISBN 1-55861-404-4, 268pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Sf novel, first published in USA, 1994; it's uniform with the same publisher's reissue [in November 2000] of the first volume in Elgin's "feminist sf classic" trilogy, *Native Tongue* [1984].) *Late entry: October publication, received in December 2002.*

Elgin, Suzette Haden. **Judas Rose: Native Tongue, 2.** Afterword by Susan M. Squier and Julie Vedder. The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, ISBN 1-55861-403-6, 380pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Sf novel, first published in USA, 1987; it's uniform with the same publisher's reissue [in November 2000] of the first volume in Elgin's "feminist sf classic" trilogy, *Native Tongue* [1984].) *Late entry: October publication, received in December 2002.*

Ellison, Harlan, ed. **Dangerous Visions: 33 Original Stories.** Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. "35th Anniversary Edition. The most honored anthology of fantastic fiction ever published." iBooks, ISBN 0-7434-5261-5, xliii+544pp, trade paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, £10.99. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 1967; this is the American edition of October 2002 with a British price and publication date added; a



rather famous all-original anthology in its day, it contains stories by Brian W. Aldiss, Poul Anderson, Isaac Asimov, J. G. Ballard, Robert Bloch, John Brunner, Samuel R. Delany, Lester del Rey, Philip K. Dick, Carol Emshwiller, Philip José Farmer, Damon Knight, R. A. Lafferty, Keith Laumer, Fritz Leiber, Larry Niven, Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, John T. Sladek, Henry Slesar, Norman Spinrad, Theodore Sturgeon, Roger Zelazny and others; this edition, the main body of which is photo-reproduced from the 1967 edition, has a new five-page introduction by Ellison and a brief foreword by Michael Moorcock, both dated July 2002; recommended as a piece of essential generic history; see the publishers' website, www.ibooksinc.com, for further details.) *December 2002.*

Elrod, P. N. **Cold Streets.** "The Vampire Files." Ace, ISBN 0-441-01009-1, 380pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, \$22.95. (Horror/crime novel, first edition; ninth in a vampiric series which has been underway for over a decade now.) *7th January 2003.*

Foster, Alan Dean. **The Approaching Storm.** "Star Wars." Arrow/Lucas Books, ISBN 0-09-944686-3, 363pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steven D. Anderson, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2002; Foster wrote the first *Star Wars* novel, 'way back in 1976 [it was published under the name of George Lucas]; he's still at it...) *2nd January 2003.*

Frost, Gregory. **Fitcher's Brides.** Introduction by Terri Windling. "The Fairy Tale Series." Tor, ISBN 0-765-30194-6, 398pp, hardcover, cover by Thomas Canty, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; set in 19th-century America, it's blurbed as "the tale of Bluebeard, re-envisioned as a dark fable of faith and truth.") *18th December 2002.*

Furey, Maggie. **The Eye of Eternity: Book Three of The Shadowleague.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-115-2, 550pp, C-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £12.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there may be a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; conclusion of a Big Commercial Fantasy trilogy of the kind that this English-born, Irish-resident author specializes in.) *December 2002.*

Garcia y Robertson, R. **Lady Robyn.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-86995-9, 399pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a tale of a young woman's timeslip to 15th-century England, this is a sequel to *Knight Errant*, which we don't recall seeing.) *February 2003.*

Gifford, Nick. **Piggies**. Puffin, ISBN 0-14-131489-3, vi+214pp, B-format paperback, £4.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; "Nick Gifford" is a pseudonym of Keith Brooke, a frequent past-contributor to *Interzone*; this is his first children's novel.) 9th January 2003.

Gilmore, David D. **Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors**. University of Pennsylvania Press, ISBN 0-8122-3702-1, xi+210pp, hardcover, cover by Utagawa, \$24.95 [£17.50 in UK]. (Lightly illustrated study of imaginary monsters through the ages; first edition; the author is a professor of anthropology at the State University of New York, and describes his book as being about the origins of "all those luscious ghouls and extraterrestrials in sci-fi literature and Hollywood films... the present book may represent a coming to grips with a juvenile obsession that has endured well into middle age...") Late entry: 31st October publication, received in December 2002.

Goonan, Kathleen Ann. **Light Music**. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-889-2, viii+424pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gregory Bridges, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; it's "set in the world of" the author's earlier novel *Crescent City Rhapsody* [2000]; Kim Stanley Robinson praises this one as "a brilliant novel, a wild ride through a world transformed... Seldom have I been given a stronger sense of just how surrealist and strange humanity's future might become.") 5th December 2002.

Gray, Julia. **Alyssa's Ring: Book Five of The Guardian Cycle**. "The spectacular conclusion." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-146-2, 570pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Julia Gray" is believed to be a pseudonym of Mark and Julia Smith, who previously wrote as "Jonathan Wylie.") December 2002.

Green, Jonathan. **The Dead and the Damned**. "Warhammer." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-266-0, 280pp, A-format paperback, cover by Clint Langley, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new British writer who has contributed short stories to GW's *Inferno!* magazine.) December 2002.

Green, Simon R. **Deathstalker Legacy**. "The Legend Continues." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07247-4, 409pp, C-format paperback, cover by Mark Thomas, £10.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £17.99 [not seen]; a

return to Green's space-opera universe, last seen in *Deathstalker Destiny* [1999]; as we stated of that book, it's "old-fashioned, unpretentious, done with a certain flair...") 5th December 2002.

Greenberg, Martin H., and Brittiany A. Koren, eds. **Pharaoh Fantastic**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0109-7, 320pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains 15 all-original stories about matters Ancient Egyptian, by Brendan DuBois, Rosemary Edghill, Alan Dean Foster, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Tanya Huff, Jane Lindskold, Michael McCay, Jody Lynn Nye, Mickey Zucker Reichert, Josepha Sherman and others; this is, in effect, the latest issue of the more-or-less monthly DAW/Greenberg "pulp magazine.") December 2002.

Haldeman, Joe. **Guardian**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00977-8, 231pp, hardcover, cover by Craig White, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; despite having a cover which suggests outer space, it seems to be set mainly in Alaska, in the late 19th century; it looks intriguing.) 3rd December 2002.

Harland, Paul. **The Hand That Takes**. Aeon Press [2 Post Rd., Lusk, Co. Dublin, Ireland], ISBN 0-9534784-2-4, 264pp, trade paperback, £8.95. (Sf novel, first edition; this is a first novel in English by a Dutch writer who "has won the national Dutch award for best science-fiction story four times" and is "the author of some 50 anthologized stories" and several novels published in the Netherlands; no translator is credited, so it seems likely the book was written in English; David Murphy and other members of the Irish group [responsible for the sf magazine *Albedo One*] who have published the novel

are acknowledged for their editorial help.) No date shown: received in December 2002.

Holt, Thomas. **A Song for Nero: A Novel**. Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-86113-8, 470pp, hardcover, cover by Larry Rostant, £16.99. (Historical novel, first edition; this is by the well-known fantasist Tom Holt, now sporting a fuller forename for his more serious works; it has a faintly alternate-world flavour, in that it posits that the Emperor Nero wasn't killed in AD 69, but faked his own death...; it's billed as Holt's "fourth historical novel"; well, we knew of his two-part Ancient Greek opus, *The Walled Orchard* [1989-1990], but we never saw *Alexander at the World's End*, which sounds intriguing, or *Olympiad*.) January 2003.

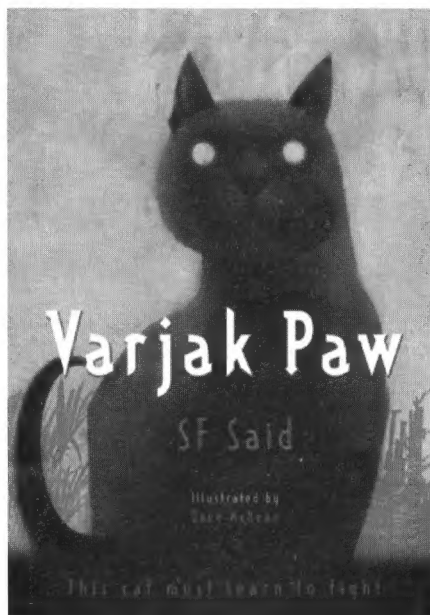
Holt, Tom. **The Divine Comedies**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-145-4, 614pp, B-format paperback, cover by Steve Lee, £8.99. (Humorous fantasy omnibus, first edition; the two novels it contains are *Here Comes the Sun* [1993] and *Odds and Gods* [1995] – one of which was praised by the *Mail on Sunday* as "frantically wacky and wilfully confusing.") December 2002.

Hunt, Walter H. **The Dark Path**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30606-9, 413pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; yet more military space opera, sequel to *The Dark Wing* [2001]; it's full of names, words and phrases such as "Cicero," "Cincinnatus," "Commodore," "Admiral," "Imperial Navy," "His Imperial Majesty's ship," "His Majesty's Fleet," and, of course, "Aye-aye, sir.") February 2003.

Hunter, Kim. **Wizard's Funeral: Book Two of the Red Pavilions**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-143-8, 343pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; it's set in "the troubled kingdom of Zamerkand.") January 2003.

Jordan, Robert. **Crossroads of Twilight: Book Ten of The Wheel of Time**. "The International No. 1 Bestseller." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-129-2, 700pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; Jordan's by-now customary biannual opus, no doubt this will be another huge bestseller, crushing all before it on the mainstream lists both sides of the Atlantic; "Robert Jordan" is a pseudonym for James Rigney, Jr; you can tell that the author has become a serious commercial property when they start giving his books drab non-pictorial covers and just rely on the byline – ROBERT JORDAN – to sell the brand-name product, Stephen King-wise.) January 2003.

Kerr, Katharine. **Snare: A Novel of the Far Future**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224617-1,



630pp, C-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £12.99. (Sf novel, first edition; it's set circa the year 4200 AD, at a time when the English, French and Arabic languages have mutated into new

forms; the author makes the following prefatory apology, perhaps a sign of our present times: "In the same way, the outer forms of the religions described have mutated to a greater or lesser degree. I sincerely hope that no believers will find this offensive...") 6th January 2003.

Kress, Nancy. **Crossfire**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30467-8, 364pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; in which "two alien species wage war across interstellar space, with humanity caught in the crossfire..."; it hardly seems five minutes since Kress's last novel, *Probability Space* [September 2002].) February 2003.

Lebbon, Tim. **White, and Other Tales of Ruin**. Introduction by Jack Ketchum. Illustrated by Caniglia. Night Shade Books [501 S. Willamette St., Newberg, OR 97132, USA], ISBN 1-892389-34-7, 342pp, trade paperback, cover by Caniglia, \$15. (Horror/sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at \$27 [not seen] and a signed, limited, slipcased edition priced at \$60 [not seen]; it contains six substantial stories by this British writer, two of them previously unpublished, plus story notes by the author; the title novella, *White*, originally published as a chapbook [MoT Press, 1999], won the British Fantasy Award.) 7th January 2003.

Le Guin, Ursula K. **The Other Wind**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00993-X, 273pp, trade paperback, cover by Cliff Nielsen, \$13.95. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; a new tale in the author's highly-praised Earthsea cycle, it won the 2002 World Fantasy Award for best novel.) 7th January 2003.

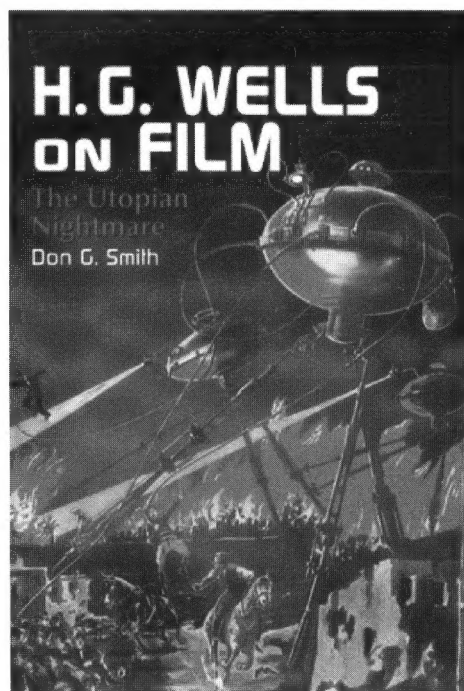
Lovecraft, H. P., and Donald Wandrei. **Mysteries of Time and Spirit: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Donald Wandrei**. Edited by S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz. Night Shade Books [501 S. Willamette St., Newberg, OR 97132, USA], ISBN 1-892389-50-9, xx+439pp, trade paperback, \$20. (Collected correspondence of two American horror writers, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at \$40 [not seen]; H. P. Lovecraft [1890-1937] was a legendary letter-writer, and another book of his copious correspondence will always be welcome to enthusiasts; the lesser-known correspondent here, Donald Wandrei [1908-1987], was co-

founder with August Derleth of Arkham House, the small press set up to publish Lovecraft's works after his death; the letters are scrupulously annotated, and the volume also contains a glossary, bibliography and full index.) 7th January 2003.

MacLeod, Ken. **Engine City**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30502-X, 304pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; proof copy received; this is "Engines of Light, Book Three," although the American publishers don't advertise that fact on the title page; it's the conclusion to in the space-opera trilogy which began with *Cosmonaut Keep* [2000] and *Dark Light* [2001].) January 2003.

Marley, Louise. **The Maquisarde**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00976-X, 386pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Cocozza, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; it opens in France, in a dystopian future of almost a century hence; the title is a French term for a kind of resistance fighter; Marley is not a writer whose work we are familiar with, but this is at least her sixth novel – her previous books all seem to have been paperback originals.) 3rd December 2002.

Marillier, Juliet. **Child of the Prophecy: Book Three of the Sevenwaters Trilogy**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648606-1, 577pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2001; conclusion of this romantic Celtic-fantasy trilogy by a New Zealand-born author who now lives near Perth, Australia; it comes with commendations from people like Sara Douglass, Barbara Erskine and Anne McCaffrey.) 6th January 2003.



Matheson, Richard. **Duel: Terror Stories**. Preface by Ray Bradbury. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87826-5, 395pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Horror collection, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it contains 18 of Matheson's best-known terror tales, all of them previously collected, and several of them, such as the famous title piece, adapted for TV and film over the years; it's a companion volume to Tor Books's earlier Matheson collection, *Nightmare at 20,000 Feet: Horror Stories* [2002].) January 2003.

Michalson, Karen. **Hecate's Glory**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-89060-5, 479pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *Enemy Glory* [2001]; according to an amusingly informative quote from *Publishers Weekly*, the previous book was a "well-crafted first novel about a wizard's education, a sort of Harry Potter on downers, [which] strives for a baroque density reminiscent of the Gormenghast saga.") February 2003.

Napier, Bill. **The Lure**. "Some secrets should never be uncovered." Headline, ISBN 0-7472-6727-8, 402pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; this is packaged as a thriller for the mainstream audience, but seems to be straightforward sf about a signal received from an alien intelligence in outer space; the author, who has written two previous novels, *Nemesis* and *Revelation*, is described by his publishers as "Britain's answer to Michael Crichton"; he is Scottish by background, an astronomer by profession, and works in Northern Ireland.) January 2003.

Neiderman, Andrew. **Curse**. Pocket, ISBN 0-7434-5039-6, 357pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 2000.) 6th January 2003.

Norton, Andre, and Sherwood Smith. **Atlantis Endgame: A New Time Traders Adventure**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85922-8, 253pp, hardcover, cover by Julie Bell, \$23.95. (Young-adult sf novel, first edition; although billed as a collaboration, it is probably a sharecrop [the acknowledgments are signed by Smith alone]; it's a follow-up to the series of juvenile novels Norton began with *The Time Traders* [1958]; "Sherwood Smith" is a pseudonym of Christine Lowen-trout, who has also written under various other names.) 22nd December 2002.

Resnick, Mike. **The Return of Santiago**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30224-1, 464pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a belated sequel to one of

Resnick's most successful works, the space opera – or, more accurately, the “western-in-space” – *Santiago* [1986], about an interstellar outlaw.) *February 2003.*

Ryan, Dermot, and Nigel Quinlan. **This Way Up.** Aeon Press [2 Post Rd., Lusk, Co. Dublin, Ireland], ISBN 0-9534784-1-6, 92+85pp, trade paperback, cover by Arron Roebuck, £7.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; this is actually two slim collections, consisting of four stories by Ryan and six by Quinlan, arranged back-to-back [with the same cover illustration reproduced on both sides of the book]; the majority of the stories by both authors first appeared in the Irish sf magazine *Albedo One*.) *No date shown: received in December 2002.*

Said, S. F. **Varjak Paw.** Illustrated by Dave McKean. David Fickling Books, ISBN 0-385-60415-7, 191pp, hardcover, cover by McKean, £10.99. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; about the fantastic adventures of a Mesopotamian Blue kitten, this is a debut novel by a writer who has “lived in London since he was two years old... and gained a PhD in criminology from Cambridge University”; the publisher, David Fickling Books, is an imprint of Random House Children's Books.) *3rd January 2003.*

Sarrantonio, Al, ed. **Redshift: Extreme Visions of Speculative Fiction.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45904-0, xv+665pp, A-format paperback, \$7.99. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 2001; it's dedicated “To Harlan, of course”; that, plus the word “Visions” in the title, tell us where this book is coming from: it's nothing less than Sarrantonio's attempt to do a *Dangerous Visions* for the early 21st century; the trouble is, he's known as a horror writer and editor, and a good deal of this anthology smacks of that genre rather than sf *pur*; it contains all-new stories by Catherine Asaro, Neal Barrett, Jr., Stephen Baxter, Gregory Benford, Jack Dann, Paul Di Filippo, Thomas M. Disch, Elizabeth Hand, Joe Haldeman, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, James Patrick Kelly, Kathe Koja & Barry Malzberg, Ursula K. Le Guin, Michael Moorcock, David Morrell, Larry Niven, Joyce Carol Oates, Kit Reed, Rudy Rucker & John Shirley, Dan Simmons, Michael Marshall Smith, Harry Turtledove, Gene Wolfe and a few others; certainly an excellent line-up, although the editor's gushy, slangy, sub-Ellisorian introduction and story-intros may put some readers' teeth on edge.) *December 2002.*

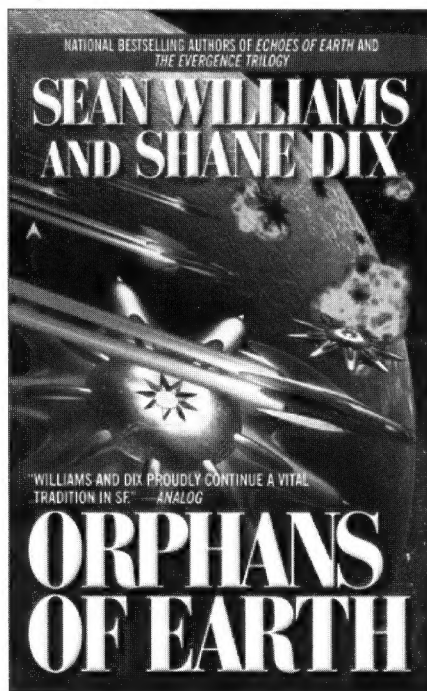
Sawyer, Robert J. **Humans.** “Volume Two of *The Neanderthal Parallax*.” Tor, ISBN 0-312-87691-2, 384pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, February 2003

first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *Hominids* [2002], in a trilogy concerning the encounter between modern humans and a Neanderthal civilization in a parallel timestream.) *February 2003.*

Siegel, Jan. **Witch's Honour.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651282-8, 312pp, A-format paperback, cover by the John Howe, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; conclusion of the trilogy begun with *Prospero's Children* [1999] and *The Dragon-Charmer* [2000]; “Jan Siegel” is a pseudonym of Amanda Hemingway [born 1955], who wrote the sf novel *Pzyche* [1982] plus a number of other works.) *6th January 2003.*

Siegel, Mark. **Echo and Narcissus.** Aardwolf Press [PO Box 14792, Durham, NC 27709-4792, USA], ISBN 0-9706225-2-X, 249pp, trade paperback, cover by Frank Wu, \$14.95. (Horror novel, first edition; a “dark fantasy” about rock musicians and unearthly forces, this is its American author's debut novel, and comes with cover commendations from Edward Bryant, Paul Di Filippo and Tim Powers; the author, who “in recent years... has published the true murder chronicle *Rocky Point*, and 17 short stories,” is not young [age 53].) *February 2003.*

Smith, Don G. **H. G. Wells on Film: The Utopian Nightmare.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1058-2, vii+197pp, hardcover, \$39.95. (Illustrated study of the films based on Wells's novels; first edition; sterling-priced import copies should be available in the UK from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; the book is arranged chronologically by novel or short story, and includes accounts of films based



on such “mainstream” novels of Wells's as *Kipps* and *The History of Mr Polly* as well as the more numerous sf and fantasy works; there is an annotated bibliography and an index.) *February 2003.*

Tepper, Sheri S. **A Plague of Angels.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-799-3, 559pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Rawlings, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993; Gollancz seem to be putting themselves full-heartedly behind the reprinting of most of Tepper's books.) *5th December 2002.*

Tepper, Sheri S. **Sideshow.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-319-X, 482pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Rawlings, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; third in the author's loose series of imaginative, well-written planetary romances which also included *Grass* [1989] and *Raising the Stones* [1990]; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 59.) *5th December 2002.*

Walton, Jo. **The Prize in the Game.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30263-2, 253pp, hardcover, cover by Jean Pierre Targete, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the third novel by this Welsh-born, Canadian-resident writer; it's a follow-up to *The King's Peace* [2000] and *The King's Name* [2001].) *23rd December 2002.*

Watson, Ian. **Chaos Child: Book 3 of the Inquisition War.** “Warhammer 40,000.” Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-256-3, 281pp, A-format paperback, cover by Clint Langley, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first published in the UK, 1995; conclusion of a Gothic space opera of considerable inventiveness and atmosphere.) *December 2002.*

Williams, Sean, and Shane Dix. **Orphans of Earth.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-01006-7, viii+374pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, \$7.50. (Sf novel, first edition; follow-up to *Echoes of Earth* [2002], of which we said: “more space opera of the knotty Australian type, with diagrams, appendices, and what looks like brain-hurting science; vide the works of Damien Broderick, Sean McMullen and, of course, Greg Egan – although this may be somewhat lighter-toned than most of those.”) *January 2003.*

Zahn, Timothy. **Dragon and Thief: A Dragonback Adventure.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30124-5, 234pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Young-adult sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; first of a new space-going series, in the tried-and-true “Heinlein juvenile” mode which has become one of the central threads of American sf, by this popular hard-sf writer; the “dragon” of the title is an alien companion.) *February 2003.*

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